

## Catholic 101, Hierarchy of the Church

When we hear the word *hierarchy*, many of us may think of a pyramid, or any other image that represents power or authority from the top down. Perhaps for many of us that is the operative image we think of when we here about the Hierarchy of the Church; maybe we think of the clergy which organized into orders and ranks with each one subordinate to the one above it. So, using the pyramid image the pope would be at the top, with the Holy See under him then the cardinals and under them the bishops, etc. While this may be the perception, it is not the vision. To truly understand our ecclesiology (theology of church) we would have to turn the pyramid upside down putting the pope at the bottom with each "layer" above him supporting the "layer" above it. We so often think of the pope in terms of power, and certainly we cannot deny he does wield a great deal of power and influence in the world, as does our Archbishop, George Lukas, but he is first and foremost servant of the Church. While he is the leader of the Church his authority is rooted in St. Peter who Jesus Christ chooses to be "the rock," the foundation of the Church. St. Peter, with the other disciples were commissioned by Christ to be servants of the people, to wash the feet of those they serve, and to never lord authority over those they lead, but to preach and teach with the humility and compassion. Thus standing upon the "rock" or Pope Benedict XVI, who has inherited Peter's responsibility and works always in union with all this bishops of the world is Roman Curia (or Holy See) the Vatican officials and offices that are responsible for day-to-day handling of Church affairs. The next layer of this inverted pyramid is the bishops. Peter was one of twelve apostles Jesus *appointed to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message...* (Mark 3:14-15.) The commissioning Jesus gave to the apostles was passed down to successors through the ages to the present. Catholics call the successors of the apostles bishops. An archbishop is a bishop who heads a diocese with either has made a significant contribution to our Church history or has the greatest population in a geographical region. Cardinal is an honorary rank given to members of the clergy by the pope. They are the body of clerics who elect the pope. The next layers of people who hold up the layer on top of them are priests who are ordained by bishops to be their coworkers in the mission of Jesus Christ. Deacons are ordained members of the clergy who are ordained specifically for works of charity and assisting and presiding at liturgical functions. Religious women and men live the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and give their lives in service to the Church to witness to the Gospel. The largest layer, which in our image would be the top of the pyramid, is the Laity, are all those who like the pope and bishops priests, deacons and religious, are called to be Disciples of Christ and bring the presence of Christ into their life in the world and in their homes.