

Orthodoxy and Primacy, St Peter and the Apostles

Introduction

First, I intend to offer a brief historical overview of the development of the primacy of Old Rome into the modern era. We shall then look at the biblical background and those subsequent developments in more depth.

How the West was lost

The papacy has claimed, especially in the centuries of the second millennium that the teaching of Christ in St Matthew's Gospel, the so-called Petrine text, (*"you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church"* Matthew 16:18-19) legitimises the claim of the Bishop of Rome to be St Peter's successor and to enjoy enduring authority in the Church. This claim was later conceived as having not just a first place of honour among senior bishops in the Church (*primus inter pares*, the first among equals) but rather a place of first *without equal*, a universal jurisdiction over all the churches. We shall examine this biblical text in more detail later together with the role of Old Rome in the time when the west was also Orthodox. We begin our story in less happy times in 1054, after the Great Schism between Rome and the Christian East.

Historians observe in the late Latin west a gathering momentum toward a so-called "monarchical papacy". "Monarchical" seems appropriate because the papacy did gradually assume to itself these increasingly absolute powers in the centuries after the Great Schism, and more especially after the "reforms" of Pope Gregory VII (Hildebrand – 1015-1085). It was this Pope who replaced the papal title "Vicar of Peter" with "Vicar of Christ" and even claimed, unsuccessfully I might add, that every Pope should be made a saint (or at least considered holy) after his death. A detailed examination of his reform program for the papacy will be considered later.

In the centuries that followed the Great Schism in 1054, Rome's power and centralisation steadily increased, but not without being challenged by the Investiture Controversies with European monarchs (11th and 12th centuries), the Avignon Papal Schism (1377), the Conciliar Movement (14th to 16th century), the Great Rupture of the Protestant Reformation (16th century onwards) and Rome's own reactive consolidation in the Council of Trent (1545-1563) followed by the Counter Reformation from Trent to the end of the European Wars of Religion in 1648). The papacy's final apotheosis (let us not say from an Orthodox point of view, "high point!") happened with the proclamation of the Dogma of Papal Infallibility in 1870 at the First Vatican Council. However, even this triggered the final separation of a number of dissenting bishops who had become known as the "Old Catholics". Clearly views over time concerning the papacy had varied and developed.

We have now come to the end of our brief historical survey of the Second Millennium. Let us now explore how this all began by returning in exegetical mode to the key issue of the Matthean Petrine text, and then move on to how this all worked out up to the Great Schism. We shall then have a better idea how and why the west progressively deviated from an Orthodox understanding of primacy and then what might be done to steer her back into the Orthodox phronema (frame of mind).

Tu es Petrus

This then is the key biblical text which under the influence of strong historical and political forces became such a bone of contention between the Christian West and the Christian East. It is of course Christ's promise to St Peter and the rest of the Twelve.

"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:18-19).

There is a delicious ambiguity and irony in our Lord calling Simon “Peter”. The etymology of the name in both Latin and Greek is, of course, “rock”. The ambiguity and irony lie in the fact that despite St Peter’s devotion to Christ and insight into who He was, nevertheless, his weakness lay in the fact that he lacked courage in the face of danger. We can see this in his concern that the Messiah should suffer, famously in his denial of Christ three times before His passion and in the famous story of his flight from Rome in a time of persecution. However, our Lord saw in him a great potential (together with James and John) to become a strong and rock-like leader, even perhaps *the* leader in the early Church. Even so, as St John Chrysostom relates, St Peter defers to St James as the lead Bishop in Jerusalem at the eponymous Council considering Gentile admission in Acts 15. Jerusalem was the First See at that time before the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

How then did St Peter become rock-like when he was anything but, not only before the resurrection but also on occasion afterwards? He made good of course in his own martyrdom, asking to be crucified upside down as being unworthy of the Lord’s own manner of execution. Throughout his life in the Church we see St Peter both learning from his weaknesses and sins and in that self-knowledge, and by faith and divine grace, being personally transformed so strongly that these personal quicksands soon solidified into his true God-given character which our Lord saw only too well as being as strong as a rock.

Peter in a united Church (more or less!)

When we consider St Peter’s place and role in the early Church, there is no indication either in the Scriptures or in any early document that a pre-eminent leadership role is given to any of his successors, either at Rome or at Antioch where with St Paul both of them ministered. Rome has to this day a place of honour, even above Antioch, for St Peter simply because this was where he was martyred and also, of course, because of the pre-eminence of the imperial city, a political factor which was providentially to prove so important in the ongoing evangelisation of Europe and North Africa outside of Egypt. The

other senior sees in the Christian East had comparable, if not identical, dignities in respect of the eastward mission of the Church which was only to be eclipsed somewhat by the emergence of Constantinople in the fourth century as the new and Eastern Rome. When the Roman Empire fell in the West in the fifth century onwards, the Bishop of Rome maintained his position as first amongst equals (*primus inter pares*) but without the political backing at least until Charlemagne. In the first millennium, therefore, old Rome had its continuing dignity and prerogatives, but never with the kind of powers that it accrued to itself after the Great Schism. This is because St Peter's rock-like qualities were not the issue at all in terms of the standing of his successors in the imperial city. Some of these popes were great men, for example Pope Leo I and Pope Gregory I, others were more of a mixed bag, for example Pope Honorius who flirted with the heresy of Monothelitism. What the good bishops received from St Peter was not an alleged dynastic leadership role but rather his rock-like faith born out of his personal growth and attachment to Christ.

When we look to the Church Fathers, we discover multiple and consistent endorsements of the dignity of Rome as the historic centre of the Christian world together with a great affection for its Apostolic Martyrs St Peter and St Paul.¹ All these patristic references focus on St Peter's faith rather than his person aside from his faith. Occasionally some Fathers refer to Christ as being the Rock, but whereas this is true it is clearly not what is being explicitly taught in the Petrine text in St Matthew's Gospel.

Alongside the Church Fathers we have the Ecumenical Councils across the first millennium which establish with great clarity and precision those aspects of the Apostolic Faith which from time to time were challenged by various heretics. In the records and canons of these Councils and those of other received local synods we frequently observe references to Rome, its faith and its key role in negotiating disputes and helping to sustain precisely in the conciliar process the unity and mind of the Church. Nowhere in these

¹ *St Peter tends to eclipse St Paul in Rome, even though this Apostle to the Gentiles was also martyred in the imperial city. The reason for this must surely be that whereas St Paul is an Apostle of equal dignity by his calling, nonetheless St Peter outranks him as being pre-eminent among the Twelve in whose company St Paul was never numbered.*

writings do we find any reference to the universal jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome, still less the infallibility of his teaching office (under certain conditions) as was articulated much later in the Latin West. The patristic and conciliar references for this Orthodox teaching on the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate understandings of the Petrine primacy are extensive and clear. There is a tendency in all of us to select evidence to suit our own arguments and causes (confirmation bias), but the sheer weight and clarity of these references certainly supports the Orthodox position. We have neither the space nor the time in this talk to quote this material in full but a footnote links to a Wikipedia article that is both fair and exhaustive in its assembly of these quotations. Please study them.²

Primacy in Orthodox terms is both the place of honour ascribed to the most senior of the bishops in Council in a particular see, (*primus inter pares*, the first among equals), his role includes being a bridge builder, a peace maker and one who confirms and promotes Orthodox faith and life among his brethren and their communities. His is certainly not a primacy of jurisdiction over his brother bishops and he may only act in and with his Synod if any bishop is to be disciplined or deposed. Nothing that a primate can do is allowed to usurp any of the canonical rights of his brother bishops. An excellent treatment of these issues in a modern context may be found in a recent address by His Eminence Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) a long-time participant in International Roman Catholic / Orthodox dialogues and consultations. This is referenced in the bibliography to this essay.

Ichabod? (Where's the glory now?)

When Rome started to step aside from the Fathers and the Councils, when she began to exalt her privileges above all reason and precedent, then we see in the second millennium fatal tensions building up, first with the Christian East in the short lived Photian Schism (863-867) and then beyond the Great Schism (1054) itself. Sometimes these

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Orthodox_opposition_to_papal_supremacy

deviations from the Orthodox understanding of primacy were driven in the west by self-serving fake histories, perhaps most notoriously the forged document, the “Donation of Constantine”³. However, these were the symptoms and not the cause of the disease and its driving force. So, what did push the west out of line with Orthodox norms on primacy?

First, we need to understand that the pressures to consolidate papal power started to gather momentum within the comprehensive reforms of the Carolingian Renaissance in the west itself when it was still, formally speaking at least, Orthodox. This renaissance and reform began in 740 on a modest scale with the father of Charlemagne, King Pepin the Short of the Franks and his co-regent brother Carloman. Charlemagne (Charles the Great or Charles I) succeeded both to become successively king of the Franks (768), king of the Lombards (774) and finally Emperor of the Romans from 800. Charlemagne’s religious reforms were not all bad and he did much to set the estate of the Orthodox west in good order, and in this he had the broad support of clerics and people alike. His military campaigns to unite Europe under the papal flag restored some semblance of what had been lost in the fall of Rome to the barbarian hordes in the 5th and 6th centuries. However, his enduring legacy in Orthodox terms was, arguably, to initiate a gradual drift towards heresy in the west by promoting the exclusive monarchism of the papal office, overt criticism of eastern Christianity, including its iconography, and the introduction of the filioque clause to the Creed of the Second Ecumenical Council. Interestingly, the Filioque clause was firmly resisted by Pope Leo III who had the unamended Creed inscribed on two heavy silver shields installing them in St Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Nonetheless, even the papacy eventually threw in its lots with Charlemagne and the Franks, no doubt motivated in no small part by the self-interest of its own office. We should now examine in a little more detail the “reforms” of Pope Gregory VII (Hildebrand – 1015-1085). He had a personal

³ In the Donation, Emperor Constantine the Great was supposed to have granted the then reigning Pope Sixtus (314-335) and his successors temporal and spiritual power over the whole Empire in perpetuity. This fanciful entirely fictitious claim was relied on by generations of Roman Catholics to legitimise a monarchical papacy until it was revealed as a forgery by Lorenzo Valla in 1440.

manifesto which, although not formally promulgated, does account for the trajectory of the papal office at the time.⁴

1. The Roman Church was founded solely by God.
2. Only the Pope can with right be called "Universal".
3. He alone can depose or reinstate bishops.
4. All bishops are below his Legate in council, even if a lower grade, and he can pass sentence of deposition against them.
5. The Pope may depose the absent.
6. Among other things, we ought not to remain in the same house with those excommunicated by him.
7. For him alone is it lawful, according to the needs of the time, to make new laws, to assemble together new congregations, to make an abbey of a canonry, and, on the other hand, to divide a rich bishopric and unite the poor ones.
8. He alone may use the Imperial Insignia.
9. All princes shall kiss the feet of the Pope alone.
10. His name alone shall be spoken in the churches.
11. His title is unique in the world.
12. It may be permitted to him to depose emperors.
13. It may be permitted to him to transfer bishops, if need be.
14. He has the power to ordain the clerk of any parish he wishes.
15. He who is ordained by the Pope may preside over another church but may not hold a subordinate position. Such a person may not receive a higher clerical grade from any other bishop.
16. No synod shall be called a "General Synod" without his order.
17. No chapter and no book shall be considered canonical without his authority.
18. A sentence passed by him may be retracted by no one. He alone may retract it.
19. He himself may be judged by no one.
20. No one shall dare to condemn any person who appeals to the Apostolic Chair.
21. The more important cases of every church should be referred to the Apostolic See.
22. The Roman Church has never erred. Nor will it err, to all eternity--Scripture being witness.
23. The Roman Pontiff, if he has been canonically ordained, is undoubtedly made holy by the merits of St. Peter, St. Ennodius Bishop of Pavia bearing witness, and many holy fathers agreeing with him. As it is contained in the decrees of Pope St. Symmachus.
24. By his command and consent, it may be lawful for subordinates to bring accusations.
25. He may depose and reinstate bishops without assembling a Synod.
26. He who is not at peace with the Roman Church shall not be considered "catholic".
27. He may absolve subjects from their fealty to wicked men.

By the time the West entered the fourteenth century and as the papal "reforms" of Pope Gregory VII began to bite deeper into the Latin Church, a reaction kicked in with the Conciliar Movement which was an attempt by the West, consciously or unconsciously, to return to the Orthodox understanding of primacy and conciliarity with less power conceded to the papacy and that primacy, and in the west at least, shared much more with local and

⁴ "Dictatus Papae" cited from here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dictatus_papae

regional councils. These local councils had continued in the west, but their authority and power had been relentlessly eroded by the ongoing development of the monarchical papacy since Hildebrand (Pope Gregory VII). Unfortunately, the Conciliar Movement failed and there now followed an all too predictable ongoing trajectory towards Vatican 1.

When Rome and the Eastern Churches attempted at a reunion at the Council of Ferrara Florence, (1431-1449), a union that failed to acquire general Orthodox support and assent, this definition was promulgated concerning papal primacy. It clarified Rome's position on the cusp of pressures that were to lead to the Protestant Reformation: -

"We likewise define that the holy Apostolic See, and the Roman Pontiff, hold the primacy throughout the entire world; and that the Roman Pontiff himself is the successor of blessed Peter, the chief of the Apostles, and the true vicar of Christ, and that he is the head of the entire Church, and the father and teacher of all Christians; and that full power was given to him in blessed Peter by our Lord Jesus Christ, to feed, rule, and govern the universal Church."

The Apotheosis of Papal Power

Little changed in terms of the definition of papal authority (the Council of Trent was largely silent on the papacy), until the 18th century when internal dissensions broke out between northern and southern European churchmen on whether or not papal teachings could, under certain circumstances, be received as infallible and therefore to be believed by all the faithful. Disagreements rumbled on through the Jansenist upheavals in France and into the 19th century when matters came to a head. Rome at the time was pushing back against what it considered to be dangerous modernist trends in European thought, the long term strengthening of those intellectual and cultural fruits of the Enlightenment. The 19th century was a period of idealism and a growing confidence in human progress. Rome reacted defensively and this all fed into the debate about papal infallibility between the Gallican tradition that opposed it and the Ultramontane tradition that promoted it.

Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903), in his Encyclical *Satis Cognitum*, expressed this ultramontane mindset perfectly in his teaching that the universal jurisdiction and teaching office of the papacy constituted Divine Law and as such, had always been accepted from Pentecost onwards. This position firmly resisted any notion that the office of the papacy had gradually evolved over time. However, this was also the very same Pope who had elevated the Anglican convert John Henry Newman to the Office of Cardinal. On becoming a Roman Catholic in 1845 Newman⁵ wrote *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, precisely teaching the evolutionary approach that was considered then to be erroneous if not heretical! If the understanding and practice of the papacy had indeed changed over time then perhaps papal infallibility could not be justified with the self-serving notion that genuine new ideas were simply old ideas not fully declared or revealed with clarity for pastoral or apologetic reasons, the *disciplina arcani*.⁶ These matters were soon to be resolved with the leadership and intervention of Pope Pius IX. In 1870 the First Vatican Council formally dogmatised Papal Infallibility, exactly corresponding to the absolutism of Pope Pius IX, who outrageously conflated his own papal office with Holy Tradition⁷, relentlessly driving through the dogma to promulgation and thereby alienating the whole of the non-Catholic world and some of its own bishops, the Old Catholics who went into schism. All, however, was to change in the twentieth century as Rome relaxed a little and opened up to the modern world, allowing scrutiny and discussion of its own doctrines and practices both in the Ecumenical Movement and in its own internal fora.

In the 20th century most Roman Catholic historians came to accept that the papacy had indeed developed over the centuries. This greater openness to historical data moved the papacy bit by bit into the modern world. Whereas pre-modern popes had been extremely guarded if not downright hostile to biblical study and historical criticism, this

⁵ Newman was canonised as a Roman Catholic saint in 2019

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disciplina_arcani

⁷ “Witness of Tradition? There is only one, that’s me.” (as recorded in the diaries of Archbishop Felix Dupanloup of Orleans and Georges Darboy of Paris, 18th June 1870)

began to change and in the ground-breaking pontificate of Pope John XXIII the windows really were flung wide open to the modern world. In retrospect the Second Council ushered in many new problems with the alienation of many from the modern liturgies and the worlds wide collapse of monastic vocations. Nonetheless, this new openness eventually also culminated in Pope John Paul the Second's Encyclical *Et Unam Sint* (1995) wherein, among other matters dividing the west, the Pope invited ecumenical contributions toward a reassessment of the Petrine Office in the cause of Christian unity.

The Orthodox have been involved in their own and ongoing ecumenical conversations with Rome (2009-2016f), much to the chagrin of many of her members who to this day consider ecumenism to be a heresy. However, the deep irony in their position is revealed by the fact that it is precisely these ecumenical encounters that have influenced generations of modern Roman Catholic theologians and pontiffs into a more "Orthodox" conception of the Petrine primacy. Some well disposed Orthodox, however, still doubt these improvements, bearing in mind the persistence of Rome's engrained behaviours. For example, it was Pope Benedict XVI, himself a proponent of papal reform away from absolutism at the Second Vatican Council, who in 2006 formally abolished the Orthodox title of the Bishop of Rome as "Patriarch of the West."⁸ Nonetheless, some progress has been made in bilateral Roman Catholic / Orthodox discussions concerning the understanding and practice of primacy during the First Millennium⁹ but the Second Millennium of the papacy remains, as always, a grave obstacle to unity in a dialogue which now seems, sadly, to have "petered" out (pun intended). So where does this leave us now with the papacy?

⁸ This action was defended at the time as aiding rather than impeding ecumenism, although most Orthodox commentators have not accepted this interpretation ... see here:

https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/vatican_says_abandoned_papal_title_patriarch_of_the_west_was_unclear_obsolete

⁹ Ecumenical document here:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/ch_orthodox_docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20160921_sinodality-primacy_en.html

Shattered Dreams or Hopeful Slumbers?

The Ecumenical Movement and the bilateral and multilateral dialogues between Rome and other churches have lost much of their impetus over the last 20 years. Many historic sticking points remain barriers to further progress, and none more so than the monarchical conception of the papacy, a conception which will just not lie down, die and be given a decent burial. Neither will the Orthodox, seemingly, put their own house in order and deal with their own often petty fractious disputes; divisions that, for the most part, while not affecting faith or life, often seriously compromise the Orthodox Church's effectiveness in mission and her public standing. Although the Orthodox very readily exclaim that "Rome needs us", perhaps also they should with more humility and graciousness accept that "we need Rome." Might it be hoped that, according to God's gracious providence, we could BOTH learn from each other, put our respective houses in a better state of repair, and look forward to that day when the historic term "Orthodox-Catholic", applied to the Church, might be one day be used by all of us again with integrity, east and west, north and south. In Christ, after all, there is no geography, symbolic or otherwise. In Christ there is no division. In Christ, there is *every* reason to hope!

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