

Roman Presidency and Christian Unity in our Time

Very Reverend Thomas Hopko

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The church of Rome held a special place of honor among the earliest Christian churches. It was first among the communities that recognized each other as catholic churches holding the orthodox faith concerning God's Gospel in Jesus. According to St Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch who died a martyr's death in Rome around the year 110, "the church which presides in the territories of the Romans" was "a church worthy of God, worthy of honor, worthy of felicitation, worthy of praise, worthy of success, worthy of sanctification, and presiding in love, maintaining the law of Christ, bearer of the Father's name." [1] The Roman church held this place of honor and exercised a "presidency in love" among the first Christian churches for two reasons. It was founded on the teaching and blood of the foremost Christian apostles Peter and Paul. And it was the church of the capital city of the Roman empire that then constituted the "civilized world (oikoumene)."

According to St Irenaeus of Lyons, the first bishop of Rome was a certain Linus. [1] He was technically Rome's first bishop since the apostles were not overseers of local churches. [2] Their unique and universal apostolic ministry, particularly that of the Twelve led by Peter, was to be foundation stones of God's household as eyewitnesses and servants of the risen Lord, the Church's cornerstone. (Eph 2.20)

Linus and the bishops of Rome who followed him, many of whom are canonized saints, were successors of the apostles together with all orthodox bishops in catholic churches. They were also, like all bishops, successors of Peter because they confessed Peter's faith that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Mt 16.16) [3] Like all catholic bishops holding the orthodox faith, the bishops of the Roman church had received the Holy Spirit through the laying-on-of-hands (cheirotonia) of the apostles to "bind and loose" the sins of humanity. (Mt 16.19, Jn 20.22-23) The bishops of Rome, like all Christian bishops with whom they held the Church's one episcopate in solidum (an expression of St. Cyprian of Carthage) [4], accomplished their episcopal service by preaching the Gospel, teaching sound doctrine, conducting right worship, shepherding the faithful, caring for the poor and needy regardless of their belief or behavior, and generally safeguarding "what had been entrusted" to them: "the good deposit (bonum depositum, kale paratheke)" that dwelt in them "through the Holy Spirit." (1Tim 6.30, 2Tim 1.14)

The bishops of Rome, like all Christian bishops of catholic churches with orthodox faith, supervised the baptisms of repenting believers into Christ in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. They sealed the newly-baptized with the gift of the Holy Spirit. They fed them the "bread of life" that is Christ himself, God's incarnate Word, through their preaching and teaching. And they nourished the faithful with Christ's body and blood at the eucharistic meal that anticipates the marriage supper of Christ, the Lamb of God, in God's coming kingdom at the end of the ages.

The orthodox bishops in catholic churches also all had the duty to reunite those who strayed, and to reconcile believing sinners to Christ through appropriate therapeutic penances. They were also obliged to defend the Christian faith against heretical teachers, most of whom were originally brother bishops. They rebuked and corrected erring and evil secular rulers. They made apologies for the Gospel to non-Christians. And they represented their churches in the societies in which they lived. In a word, all Christian bishops were ordained to preserve the unity, identity, integrity, solidarity, and continuity of Christ's church and ministry on earth until the Lord's coming. But the Roman bishops were to do so, as we have already noted, in a unique and special way, both for those within the faith and those outside it, because they were the overseers of the church founded by Christ's preeminent apostles Peter and Paul that was located in the capital of the empire that was identified with the whole "civilized world," in the city that symbolized the "end of the earth." (Acts 1.8)

Because of its unique place among the Christian churches, the church of Rome in the person of its bishop was soon tempted to assume powers, prerogatives and privileges among the churches beyond those belonging to its ministry to preside among them in love. The temptation to assume a special authoritative status among the churches beyond loving presidential leadership did not go unchallenged. We see attempts to control this tendency, for example, by such great bishops as St. Cyprian of Carthage in North Africa in the 3rd century, and St. Photios the Great of Constantinople in the 9th, [5] and perhaps most especially by Pope St. Gregory the Great of Rome itself who in the 6th century formulated his celebrated definition of a Christian bishop as "the servant of the servants of God (servus servorum Dei)" in his powerful polemic against the bishop of Constantinople, the New Rome, for adopting the title "ecumenical." [6] But the temptation to usurp unwarranted hierarchal authority and administrative control over all the world's Christians was too powerful to be resisted by the Roman bishops not only because of

Rome's legitimately unique status among the churches, but also because Rome was the only "apostolic see" in the Western half of the oikoumene. (In the East, on the other hand, practically every little church could justly claim to be an "apostolic see.")

The unique authority of the bishop of Rome over all other churches and their bishops was gradually developed and defended by applying certain interpretations of scriptural passages about Peter's first place among the apostles to the Pope of Rome's first place among the bishops. [7] This presumed authority of the bishop of Rome was also bolstered by references to allegedly historical documents that were later proved to be inventions designed for this purpose. [8] And it was shaped and developed by countless cultural and political events that produced the schism between the Roman church and the Eastern Orthodox churches, and later brought about the Protestant Reformation in the West, and so also the Roman reaction in the Counter-Reformation that made the papacy what it is today. Although the elaboration and development of what we have come to call the "imperial" papacy was not, as we have noted, without its opponents, even within the Roman church, the current understanding and practice of the so-called "Petrine ministry" reached its historical apex in the dogmatic decrees about the Pope's position and power promulgated by Vatican Council I that were slightly modified, but not essentially changed, by Vatican Council II. [9]

The Roman Church's current official teachings about papal privilege and power that are unacceptable to the Eastern Orthodox churches are the dogma of the pope's infallibility when speaking officially "from the chair of Peter (ex cathedra Petri) on matters of faith and morals" from himself and not from the consensus of the church (ex sese et non ex consensu ecclesiae); the binding character of the pope's infallible decrees on all (Catholic) Christians in the world; the pope's direct episcopal jurisdiction over all (Catholic) Christians in the world; the pope's authority to appoint, and so also to depose, the bishops of all (Catholic) Christian churches; and the affirmation that the legitimacy and authority of all (Catholic) Christian bishops in the world derive from their union with the Roman see and its bishop, the Supreme Pontiff, the unique Successor of Peter and Vicar of Christ on earth.

The revolutionary advances in technology in the last century that coincided with such traumatic events as the world wars, the rise and fall of communism, the Jewish holocaust, the most severe and widespread persecution of Christians in history, and the inner decay of Christianity, especially Protestantism, under the various secularizing forces of Western society, strongly contributed to the Pope of Rome's position as the leader of Christianity in the modern, and now post-modern, world. The papacy as we know it is not simply the result (as Marshall McLuhan would have it) of the invention of the phonetic alphabet in the Graeco-Latin world at the time of Christ's birth that shaped early Western Christianity, and the later invention of the printing press that produced the Protestant Reformation in the West, and so, also, the Counter-Reformation that solidified the "imperial" papacy that was theologically and politically created by such popes as Gregory VII in the 11th century (Dictatus Papae), and Innocent III and Boniface VIII (Unam Sanctam) in the 13th. [10] It is also the direct result of the immediate impact of the modern technology and electronic media that served to bring the Roman popes of the last half century, especially the remarkably gifted and charismatic Pope John Paul II, out of their Vatican enclosures and directly and immediately into the daily lives of people all around the world. Like it or not, by God's inscrutable providence, the emergence of contemporary electronic technology inevitably and inexorably led to the Pope of Rome becoming the universally acknowledged leader of Christianity in the world. And barring something wholly unforeseen, the Roman pope is sure to remain the world's Christian leader as long as the planet earth - and its global electronic culture - endures.

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The question now stands before all Christians concerning what they should do about the Pope of Rome's de facto leadership of Christianity in our present world. Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI were moved to raise this question as an essential part of their papal ministry. Pope John Paul II explicitly did so many times, and with particular strength and urgency in his "apostolic letter" commending Christian ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint*. And Pope Benedict XVI has already repeated the question several times on significant occasions.

I can hardly speak on behalf of the Eastern Orthodox churches about the exercise of the Roman papacy in our time. But I am encouraged to offer my opinions on the subject on the basis of the traditional Orthodox teaching testified to in the letter of the Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs in 1848 in response to Pope Pius IX's epistle "to the Easterners." This is the principle that for Orthodoxy "the protector of religion is the very body of the Church, even the people themselves" who desire to preserve the Church's faith and life free from unacceptable changes and novelties. [11] I will therefore proceed to list what I believe must happen if the Orthodox churches would consider recognizing the bishop of Rome as their world leader who exercises presidency among all the churches of Christ.

First of all, the Orthodox would insist that the bishop of Rome hold the orthodox faith of the catholic church, and teach and defend true Christian doctrine. This means that the pope would have to do several specific things, chief among which, I would think, are the following.

• He would have to confirm the original text of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol of Faith and defend its use in all the churches, beginning with his own. At the very least (should some churches for pastoral reasons be permitted to

keep the filioque in their creed), he would insist on an explanation that would clearly teach that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Son" only in relation to God's saving dispensation in the world. He would make certain that no Christian be tempted to believe that the Holy Spirit essentially proceeds from the Father and the Son together, and certainly not "from both as from one (ab utroque sicut ab uno.)"

- The pope would also teach that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are three distinct persons or hypostases, and not simply "subsistent relations" within the one God who is identified with the divine nature. And he would insist that the one true God of Christian faith is not the Holy Trinity understood as a quasi-unipersonal subject who reveals himself as Father, Son and Spirit, which is unacceptable "modalism." He would rather hold that the one God is Jesus' Father from whom the Holy Spirit proceeds who dwells in the Son, and in those who by faith and grace become sons of God through him.

- The pope would also insist that human beings can have real communion with God through God's uncreated divine energies and actions toward creatures, from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit.

- He would also officially say that the immaculate conception of Christ's mother Mary from her parents, and Mary's total glorification in the risen Christ "at the right hand of the Father," are not properly explained in the papal bulls that originally accompanied the Roman church's "ex cathedra" dogmas on these two articles of faith. The pope would explain that Mary's conception by her parents was pure and holy without a need for God extraordinarily to apply "the merits of Christ" to Joachim and Anna's sexual act of conceiving her in order to free her from "the stain of original sin." And the pope would also have to make it clear that Mary really died, and was not assumed bodily into heaven before vanquishing death by faith in her Son Jesus.

- The pope would also clearly state that though there may be a purification and cleansing from sin in the process of human dying, there is no state or condition of purgatory where sinners pay off the temporal punishment that they allegedly owe to God for their sins. The pope would also stop the practice of indulgences whereby, through certain pious activities, Christians can allegedly reduce the "days" of purgatorial suffering for themselves and others.

- The pope would also make it clear that Christ's crucifixion was not a payment of the debt of punishment that humans allegedly owe to God for their sins. He would rather teach that Christ's self-offering to his Father was the saving, atoning and redeeming payment of the perfect love, trust, obedience, gratitude and glory that humans owe to God, which is all that God desires of them for their salvation.

- The pope would also assure all Christians that the bishop of Rome will never do or teach anything on his own authority, "from himself and not from the consensus of the church (ex sese et non ex consensu ecclesiae)." He would promise to serve in his presidency solely as the spokesperson for all the bishops in apostolic succession who govern communities of believers who have chosen them to serve, and whose validity and legitimacy as bishops depend solely on their fidelity to the Gospel in communion with their predecessors in the episcopal office, and with each other.

- On undecided doctrinal and moral issues the Pope of Rome would use his presidential authority to insure that everyone — clergyman or layperson — would be encouraged to freely present his or her arguments concerning Christian teaching and practice as witnessed in the Church's formal testimonies to Christian faith and life, i.e. the canonized scriptures, the traditional liturgies, the councils and canons, and the witness and writings of the canonized saints for the reasons that they are glorified.

- The pope would also use his presidential authority to guarantee a spirit of freedom, openness, respect and love in and among all churches and Christians, and indeed all human beings, so that the Holy Spirit, Christ's sole "vicar on earth," may bring to remembrance what Christ has said, and guide people into all the truth. (Jn 14.25, 16.13) The pope would, in this way, truly be the Great Bridgebuilder (Pontifex Maximus).

In order for the Pope of Rome to exercise presidency among the churches and Christian leadership in the world, his church would also have to exemplify proper Christian worship. This, too, for Orthodox Christians, would mean some specific things.

- The pope would have to insist that, except for extraordinary pastoral reasons, baptisms would be done by immersion in water in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. He would also insist that the newly-baptized be immediately chrismated with "the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit" and brought into communion with Christ by participation in the Holy Eucharist. This includes infants who enter the Church's sacramental life by virtue of the faith of the adults who care for them. The practice of a later episcopal laying-on-of hands confirming the faith of the baptized may be permitted in churches desiring to continue this practice.

- Concerning participation in the Holy Eucharist, the pope would also insist that the faithful receive Holy Communion from the gifts, i.e. the bread and wine, actually offered at the eucharistic liturgy which they are celebrating. The faithful would not be given communion from "reserved gifts" which are kept exclusively for those unable to be

attend liturgy for good reasons, usually sickness or infirmity.

- The pope would also insure that the faithful always participate in the consecrated wine, the blood of Christ, at Holy Communion. How this is practically done may differ in different churches, but it must be done, without exception. As for the bread, unleavened wafers may be used for pastoral reasons in the churches with this practice, but the pope would affirm leavened bread as normative for the Christian Eucharist.

- The pope would insist on the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, with psalmody, scripture readings and exegetical sermons according to local ecclesial practices, as normative corporate worship for Christians on the Lord's Day and on the Church's liturgical feasts. He would forbid private eucharistic celebrations for particular intentions, and for particular pietistic, political or ideological purposes. He would support the celebration of Vespers, Compline, Matins and the Hours in the churches. He would restore the practice of having the priestly celebrant in the Latin liturgy face the altar with the faithful during the prayers and eucharistic offerings. He would also consider enforcing the ancient ascetical and penitential practice of forbidding the celebration of the Holy Eucharist in Christian churches on weekdays of Great Lent.

And finally, structural and administrative changes must occur if the Pope of Rome will be accepted and recognized as the bishop who exercises presidency among the churches and serves as Christianity's world leader. These changes would include the following.

- The bishop of Rome would be chosen by the church of Rome. His election, because of his church's unique position among the churches, and his position in the world, may have to be affirmed in some way by the patriarchs and the primates of autocephalous (i.e. self-governing) archbishoprics and metropolias throughout the world. But like the election of all Christian bishops, the pope's selection and installation would be the canonical action of the community that he oversees. A "college of cardinals" appointed by the pope and having nominal ministries in Rome would no longer exist.

- The pope would not select and appoint bishops in any churches. He would, however, affirm them in their ministries, and may even do so in some formal manner, as every bishop is called to affirm his brothers with whom he holds the one episcopate in solidum. The pope would surely have the right and duty to question the choice of a candidate for the episcopacy, especially for a regional presidency, whom he considers unsuited or unworthy of the office. He may even have the opportunity to review candidates and offer his opinion before an election occurs, especially of a presiding bishop. But the pope would do this like any other bishop or primate of a regional church. He would have no right or power to interfere in the internal affairs of any church or diocese other than his own.

- The pope would appoint commissions and departments composed of competent people from all the world's churches in communion with Rome to assist him in his service as Christianity's world leader and chief spokesperson. He would also organize regular gatherings of the primates of the world's churches to support him in his global mission. The pope would have a commission dealing with Christian doctrine and theological thought in the world's various churches, but no Roman office would exist with authority to take disciplinary action in doctrinal matters which, when required, would be handled by the local bishop. The churches' bishops, and not a team of theologians in Rome, appointed by the pope, acting on his authority and speaking in his name, would constitute the Church's magisterium.

- Each bishop would oversee the members of his flock. He would be especially attentive to the intellectual, charismatic and activist members of his church, and would exercise appropriate pastoral guidance, direction and discipline in their regard. The local bishop would forbid Holy Communion to a church member who denies Christian doctrines and/or practices that he and his brother bishops are ordained to proclaim and defend. Should a bishop be charged with teaching false doctrines or engaging in immoral behavior, or allowing those in his pastoral care to do so, he would be judged by the synod of bishops to which he belongs, even should he be its president. If found guilty of wrongdoing, his own synod would discipline or depose him. If he wishes to appeal his case, he may turn to the bishop exercising presidency among the churches of his region. And, as a last resort, he may appeal to the bishop of Rome as the Church's highest president. The pope would not have the power to make authoritative juridical decisions, but would exercise the ministry of intercession and reconciliation. The same right of appeal to regional presidencies, and ultimately to the pope of Rome, would, of course, be available to any church member charged with wrong teaching or doing.

- The bishop of Rome would also cease being an official head of state. As Christianity's global leader, however, it is well that he would live in a place with minimal risks of governmental and political interference in his ministry. The place where the pope would live, where the interchurch commissions and departments would also be located, would be governed by a layperson assigned by the Roman church. Heads of state would relate to the pope solely as a Christian bishop and spiritual leader.

- As leader of the world's Christians, the Pope of Rome would travel extensively. He would take full advantage of contemporary means of transportation and communication. He would master electronic media to serve his

ministry in proclaiming Christ's Gospel, propagating Christian faith, promoting ethical behavior, protecting human rights, and securing justice and peace for all people. He would be the servant of unity among all human beings, first of all his fellow Christians, not as an episcopus episcoporum, [12] but as a true servus servorum Dei.

Enormous goodwill, energy and time would be necessary to refashion the papacy so that the Pope of Rome might be Christianity's world leader as the bishop whose church "presides in love" among all the churches of orthodox faith and catholic tradition. And, as recent popes have insisted, radical repentance would also be required, beginning with the Roman church itself whose calling, as first among Christian churches, is to show the way to all others.

The Orthodox churches would surely have to undergo many humbling changes in attitude, structure and behavior to be in sacramental communion with the Roman church and to recognize its presidency among the churches in the person of its pope. The Orthodox would certainly have to overcome their own inner struggles over ecclesiastical power and privilege. They would have to candidly admit their sinful contributions to Christian division and disunity, and to repent of them sincerely. They would also have to forego all desires or demands for other churches to repent publicly of their past errors and sins, being willing to allow God to consign everything of the past to oblivion for the sake of bringing about the reconciliation and reunion of Christians at the present time.

In a word, the Orthodox would have to sacrifice everything, excepting only the faith itself, for the sake of building a common future together with Christians who are willing and able to do so with them. Like Roman Catholics and Protestants, they would have to be willing to die with Christ to themselves and their personal, cultural and ecclesiastical interests for the sake of being in full unity with all who desire to be saved by the crucified Lord in the one holy church "which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1.23), that is "the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth." (1Tim 3:15)

With God all things are possible. It is with this conviction that we can dare to imagine a global unity of Christians under the leadership of the bishop whose church of Rome was originally the first to "preside in love" among all of Christ's churches on earth.

[1] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, Book 3,3. "The blessed apostles (Peter and Paul), then, having founded and built up the church (of Rome), committed into the hands of Linus the office of the episcopate. (…) To him succeeded Anacletus, and after him, in the third place from the apostles, Clement was allotted the episcopate." Irenaeus completes his list of Roman bishops with his contemporary Eleutherius "who holds the inheritance of the episcopate (in Rome) in the twelfth place from the apostles."

[2] See Veselin Kesich, "Peter's Primacy in New Testament and the Early Tradition," *The Primacy of Peter, Essays in Ecclesiology and the Early Church*, John Meyendorff, ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), p. 56. See also the insightful chapters on the Church and the episcopate, with commentary on the dogmas on the papacy defined at Vatican Council I, in Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (In Russian, 1935. English translation published by St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1988), pp 1-99.

[3] See, on the interpretations of Matthew 16.13-23 and John 21.15-23 by Ignatius, Clement of Rome, Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, et. al. see Kesich, op.cit., pp. 44-66.

[4] Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, 5.

[5] See the many references to Cyprian and Photios in the essays in J. Meyendorff, *The Primacy of Peter*.

[6] St. Gregory condemned the adoption of the title "ecumenical" by Constantinople's bishop saying that the "usurpation of this proud and foolish title" is a "contradiction to the grace that is poured out on all of us in common." He calls it a "sin against the whole church" since "by reason of this execrable title of pride the Church is rent asunder, the hearts of the brethren are provoked to scandal." Letter 18, To John, Bishop of Constantinople. See also Letter 19, To Deacon Sabinianus where Pope Gregory says that "to assent to this title is nothing other than to lose the faith." See also Letter 20, To Mauricius Augustus. One cannot fail to notice that St. Gregory says nothing about special powers and privileges of his Roman church, nor of his office as Pope of Rome. One can only wonder what he would think of the modern "imperial" papacy, and the dogmas concerning the Pope of Rome defined at Vatican Councils I and II.

[7] See again, J. Meyendorff, *The Primacy of Peter*.

[8] I have in mind here such forgeries as the *Donatio Constantini* and the *Isidorian Decretals*.

[9] Vatican II's teaching about episcopal collegiality is neither helpful nor accurate from a traditional Orthodox point of view. The "college of bishops" does not govern the universal church together with the Pope of Rome, under his leadership and guidance. Each bishop governs his own church, and gives an account of his governance to his brother bishops within his own regional synod. There is no universal episcopal authority, with or without the Roman pope, over the universal church, just as no "college of apostles" governed the apostolic church under the leadership and authority of Peter.

[10] Those concerned with Christian unity would surely benefit from the insightful, delightful and provocative ideas about the influence of media on Christian unity and divisions in the recently published essays and interviews of Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980). McLuhan converted to Catholicism in 1937 and remained a faithful communicant of the church until his death. See Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light, Reflections on Religion*, Eric McLuhan and Jack Szklarek, Editors. (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1999)

[11] *Encyclical Epistle of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church to the Faithful Everywhere*. (South Canaan, Pennsylvania: The Orthodox Book Center, 1958) p. 25. See also the reply of the Great Church of Constantinople to the

letter of Pope Leo XIII in 1895.

[12] The expression comes from the Seventh Council of Carthage under the leadership of its bishop and martyr Cyprian: "for neither does any of us set himself up as a bishop of bishops (episcopus episcoporum.)" See the comments of Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 37 ff.