

Principles of Primacy in Eastern Orthodoxy

Why Orthodox Do Not Accept Papal Supremacy

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Author's Forward:

This essay is an attempt to present the historic concerns and arguments of the Orthodox Fathers and theologians regarding the understanding of Papal Primacy. Only by understanding the authentic position of the Orthodox Church will anyone be able to contemplate and discover an expression of Roman Primacy that would be acceptable. The Pope of Rome, H.H. John Paul II, invited Eastern theologians to weigh in on this issue in order to assist the process of finding an acceptable form of Roman Primacy. This article is intended to be a thought-provoking step in that direction.

1. In the Christian East, primacy has always been understood as being exercised with the agreement of the other bishops. As Alexander Schmemmann explains,

[The synod's] second constitutive element is the existence among these bishops of a clearly defined primacy of the *first bishop*. This primacy is defined in the famous Apostolic Canon 34.²

Apostolic Canon 34 (4th C.) states,

The bishops of every nation must acknowledge him who is first among them and account him as their head, and do nothing of consequence without his consent... but neither let him (who is first) do anything without the consent of all; for so there will be unanimity.³

2. To Orthodox, the Latin Catholic doctrine on the Pope of Rome's authority seems to contradict this understanding of primacy. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states,

For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.⁴

This also appears to contradict the understanding of the early Church regarding the primacy of the Bishops of Rome. St. Augustine, for example, indicated that an Ecumenical Council is superior to the judgment of the Bishops of Rome:

¹ Originally published on the web on June 6, 2002 and revised February 12, 2011

² "The Idea of Primacy In Orthodox Ecclesiology," qt. in *The Primacy of Peter*, SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 1992, p.161.

³ For the full document of the Apostolic Canons, see my webpage: www.looys.net/stepanos.html

⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church #882.

...as if it might not have been said, and most justly said, to them: ‘Well, let us suppose that those bishops who decided the case at Rome were not good judges; there still remained a plenary Council of the universal Church, in which these judges themselves might be put on their defense; so that, if they were convicted of mistake, their decisions might be reversed.’⁵

3. According to Orthodox, primacy was meant to be exercised in the Church, not over it. As St. Augustine once put it, “Peter had not a primacy over the Apostles, but among the Apostles, and Christ said to them ‘I will build upon Myself,’ not ‘I will be built upon thee.’”⁶ Fr. Nicholas Afanassieff explains the Orthodox approach to primacy (priority):

The basis of priority is neither power, nor honor, but only the authority that flows from love and is made manifest by love. The church-in-priority may make mistakes in the very act of coming to the rescue of churches in need and especially of churches in error; that is why the witness of the other churches is needed. Its grand mistake is wanting to impose a sovereign will or put itself above other churches. This is the first step that leads in the end to revoking priority and resisting the will of God, for it is a renouncing of the love that spreads throughout the Church. By putting itself above all the number of local churches, which embosom its own priority, it takes a road that may lead it outside the bounds of that number, to a place where there is no priority, only a realm of ‘ecclesiological vacuum.’ Priority implies the existence of a number of local churches, and every church among them is the church of God just as much as is the church-in-priority. When a local church invokes the church-in-priority, it is not invoking judgment from a tribunal against which there is no appeal, but coming to the church-in-priority so as to find itself, by hearing the voice of the Church which dwells there. What possible explanation can we give for the priority of one church among the whole number of local churches? You may explain it, to be sure, by her own endeavors to manifest in her own life the Church of God in Christ, on the basis of purely historical facts -her being in some special town, or being founded by Apostles, or having many adherents- but all these causes are not sufficient in themselves, since other local churches may perfectly well possess whatever advantages the church-in-priority possesses. It must be admitted in the end that priority is a gift of God, and so an election by God. We cannot fully understand it, but the whole mass of local churches accept it in freedom and love, and follow the church-in-priority.⁷

4. In the Orthodox East, all Bishops are seen as holding the place of Peter as the head of their Churches. As Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan explains,

In the Eastern view, which follows that of Origen, all bishops who have the faith of Peter are successors of Peter together with the other Apostles. All inherit the

⁵ Letter 43:19

⁶ Sermons XXVI.1-2, Philip Schaff, Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers, Eerdmans, 1956, Volume VI, , p. 340.

⁷ “The Church Which Presides In Love,” qt. in *The Primacy of Peter*, p.114, 115.

same faith and no one bishop could be considered the sole guardian of the Christian tradition. St. Cyprian, after quoting from the Gospels passages where Christ empowers Peter and the other Apostles, states in the well-known passage: ‘That He might set forth unity, He arranged by His authority the origin of that unity as beginning from one. Assuredly the rest of the Apostles were also the same as was Peter, endowed with a like partnership both of honor and power, but the beginning proceeds from unity.’⁸

The great Armenian Church Father, St. Gregory the Illuminator (AD 265-327) in the work produced from his catechetical instructions to King St. Tiridates, known as *The Teaching of St. Gregory*, taught that the “keys of the kingdom” were entrusted to all the Apostles who collectively are the foundations of the Church:

The Apostles became the foundations [Eph 2:20], and received the grace of priesthood and prophecy and apostleship and knowledge of the heavenly mystery which came in the seed of Abraham, which John [the Baptist], the keeper of the tradition of the inheritance, gave to the Lord, and the Lord gave to the apostles. And He gave the keys of the kingdom into their hands [Mt 16:19], because the Son of God Himself was the gate for those who enter [Jn 10:7, 9]; concerning whom the prophet declared: ‘This is the gate of the Lord, and the just enter through it [Ps 117:20].’ So John gave the priesthood and the anointing and the prophecy and the kingship to our Savior Christ: and Christ gave them to the apostles, and the apostles to the clergy.⁹

5. Orthodox see the Church of Rome’s primacy as being at least partially based on its location as the Imperial Capital. Fr. John Meyendorff explains,

But then why was the church of Rome vested with primacy among other churches, a primacy ‘analogous’ to the one that Peter had among the Apostles? The Byzantines had a clear answer to this question: this Roman primacy came not from Peter, whose presence had been more effective and better attested in Jerusalem or in Antioch than in Rome, but from the fact that Rome was the capital of the Empire. Here all Byzantine authors are in agreement: the 28th Canon of Chalcedon is for them an axiom.¹⁰

Peter left successors in the Apostolic See of Antioch as well as in Rome. According to Orthodox, the bishops of Antioch also should have been empowered with the Petrine “power of the keys” if this results from being a successor of Peter. This underlines the view that the Church of Rome gained its primacy as a result of being the Imperial Capital.

⁸ “Problems and Exercise of Primacy,” qt. in *Armenian Church Historical Studies*, p. 205.

⁹ *Teaching of St. Gregory*, Par. #468, Tr. Robert W. Thomson, p. 141, New Rochelle, NY.

¹⁰ “St. Peter in Byzantine Theology,” qt. in *The Primacy of Peter*, p. 82. An Ancient Epitome of Canon 28 of Chalcedon reads: “The bishop of New Rome shall enjoy the same honor as the bishop of Old Rome, on account of the removal [relocation] of the Empire. For this reason the [metropolitans] of Pontus, of Asia, and of Thrace, as well as the Barbarian bishops shall be ordained by the bishop of Constantinople.”

6. Orthodox consider St. Peter as being first among the Twelve - not over them (i.e., *first among equals*). As Nicholas Koulomzine states,

But we must make clear, yet again, that Peter is first of the Twelve, [and] first among the Twelve. The text of Acts confirms this: Peter never acts or speaks alone, but in company with the Twelve, or sometimes John. Luke, presumed author of the Book of Acts, makes this very clear, perhaps by design, in all the texts concerning Peter in the first five chapters.¹¹

As St. John Chrysostom stated, “Behold, how Peter does all things by common consent, and decides nothing by his own power or authority.”¹²

7. Just as St. Peter had to be accountable and answer to the other Church leaders at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 11:1-18, so must the Bishop of Rome answer to the other Patriarchs and Bishops of the Church. The Roman Catholic teaching that “there is neither appeal nor recourse against a sentence or decree of the Roman Pontiff”¹³ is seen by Orthodox as contradicting the above assertions by Sts. Augustine and Chrysostom and Apostolic Canon 34.

8. As Fr. John Meyendorff states, “*By analogy* the Pope of Rome was viewed as in the place of St. Peter among the Apostles. But this analogy should be limited by the councils and not pushed too far to insinuate a dominance.”¹⁴

9. Orthodox see the differing interpretations of the Scriptural Petrine passages from the earliest times of the Church as demonstrating that there was not one authoritative interpretation handed on from the Apostles. In other words, it is clear that the Roman Catholic interpretation was not the sole, universal understanding of that text.¹⁵ Orthodox see these Scriptural interpretations (of Papal Supremacy) as put forward primarily by Popes attempting to advance their own prerogatives and power.

10. In the case of the Quartodecimans the Orthodox understanding of primacy is affirmed. The Pope of Rome excommunicated a Church. The majority of bishops disagreed with the Pope and did not accept this decision of excommunication. He, then, conformed his decision to be in harmony with the judgment of all (in accord with Apostolic Canon 34). As Eusebius of Caesarea writes,

Thereupon Victor, who presided over the church at Rome, immediately attempted to cut off from the common unity the parishes of all Asia [Minor], with the churches that agreed with them, as heterodox; and he wrote letters and declared all

¹¹ “Peter’s Place in the Primitive Church,” qt. in *The Primacy of Peter*, p. 14.

¹² *Homily on the Acts of the Apostles*, 8d.

¹³ *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* #45.3; *Latin Code of Canon Law* #333.3.

¹⁴ “St. Peter in Byzantine Theology,” qt. in *The Primacy of Peter*, p. 89.

¹⁵ See the many varying Patristic interpretations of and comments on the Petrine passages.

the brethren there wholly excommunicate. But this did not please all the bishops. And they besought him to consider the things of peace, and of neighborly unity and love. Words of theirs are extant sharply rebuking Victor. ...[Irenaeus] fittingly admonishes Victor that he should not cut off whole churches of God which observed the tradition of an ancient custom.¹⁶

11. If the supremacy of the See of Rome was a teaching passed down by the Apostles, why did not any among the Oriental Orthodox confess this when these Churches rejected the Tome of Pope Leo I and the Council of Chalcedon? If Papal Supremacy was part of the Apostolic preaching, surely some among them would have objected, “We must obey the Pope of Rome in all matters.” The same argument is raised concerning the Eastern Orthodox who separated from Rome in AD 1054.

12. To Eastern Christians, the question of primacy is more a question of canonical procedure and Church administration than that of theological faith. Those in the Latin Church who raise it to the level of dogma may unnecessarily cause division within the Church. In reality, on the matters of dogmatic faith, which were addressed by the early Ecumenical Councils, the ancient Churches are agreed. Pope Paul VI affirmed this when he commented that the Catholics and Orthodox live in “nearly total communion” and when he referred to the later Western councils not as “ecumenical” but rather as the “general synods of the West.”

In recent times, under the leadership of Pope Paul VI, an important initiative of the See of Rome took place that has unfortunately largely gone unnoticed. Paul VI expressed the conviction that in fact there are two sorts of councils in the patrimony of the West, the early ecumenical councils of the undivided church and then the general synods of the West. In an important letter dated October 5, 1974, and addressed to Cardinal Willebrands on the occasion of the seventh centenary of Lyons II (1274), the pope wrote: “This Council of Lyons counted as the sixth of the general synods held in the West...” This terminology of “general synods” suggests that Catholic teaching is willing to accept the notion of varying levels of councils, what Yves Congar has called a hierarch of relative order of importance among councils and synods (*hierarchia conciliorum*).¹⁷

13. Even up to the time of the Great Western Schism, many in the West considered the council to be superior to the decisions of the Pope of Rome. Orthodox see this as an indication that Papal Supremacy is not of Apostolic origin and was not even clearly defined by the Latin West until late in ecclesiastical history. Hence the Bishops of the Latin Church in the Council of Basel (AD 1439) decreed:

(1) A general council is above a Pope

¹⁶ *Church History* 5:23:1-24:11.

¹⁷ *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, Vol. 2, p. 68, ed. Francis Schussler Fiorenza, John P. Galvin, Augsburg Fortress, 1991.

- (2) The Pope cannot dissolve or interrupt a council, nor can he transfer it to another place.
- (3) Anyone who denies these truths is a heretic.

14. Orthodox see in the First Vatican Council's definition on Papal Infallibility an implicit recognition of the superiority of the Ecumenical Council. In other words, it was a Council which declared the Pope supreme. Archbishop Malachias Ormanian explains,

The ancient Churches referred to the authority of Oecumenic Councils all beliefs which were in question, in order that any difficulty raised in connection with a dogma might be solved. That rule has never ceased to be rigorously observed from the early centuries until our present time. The Roman Church alone deemed it necessary, in the second half of the nineteenth century, to take away that prerogative from the Councils and to fix it on the person of the Pope. But, in order to justify such a usurpation of authority, she could not do less than refer to that self-same authority which she had despoiled, thus compelling it to commit a moral suicide.¹⁸

15. According to some Orthodox writers, in the papal bull, *Quia Quorundum* (1324), Pope John XXII condemned the doctrine of unchangeable papal decrees as the “work of Satan.” As Klaus Schatz, SJ, explains,

When the spiritual Franciscans, in turn, declared John XXII a heretic - appealing to the principle that what had once been defined by the popes through the “key of knowledge” (i.e. magisterially) was a truth of faith and could no longer be called into question by a successor -the pope condemned that principled as “false.”¹⁹

These are some of the main arguments of why Orthodox call for a more balanced and historic application of the Petrine office of the See of Rome. At the same time, Orthodox must beware not to, as Orthodox theologian Olivier Clement put it, suffer from a case of “ecclesiastical amnesia”²⁰ and insinuate that Rome had no historical role of leadership in the Church.

¹⁸ *The Church of Armenia*, p. 99.

¹⁹ *Papal Primacy*, Klaus Schatz, SJ, p. 118. Roman Catholics insist this was not about the doctrine of Infallibility but Church legislation. As one Catholic writer explains, “Infallibility, as defined in the First Vatican Council, requires that the faith of the whole Church be the norm of papal definitions; that these definitions be according to Scripture; that the pope speaks infallibly only when he speaks as teacher and pastor of all the faithful, with the infallibility with which Christ endowed his Church as a whole. This is ‘ex cathedra’ infallibility.” Accessed on-line at: www.cathinfo.com/catholic.php/Pope-denies-infallibility-2

²⁰ *You Are Peter*, Olivier Clement, New City Press, 2003.