

Gregory the Great and Papal Primacy

ISSUE: In A.D. 587 Emperor Maurice granted the title “ecumenical patriarch” or “universal bishop” to John the Faster, Patriarch of Constantinople. Pope St. Gregory the Great condemned the title. Later, when others tried to apply them to him as bishop of Rome, he refused the titles. In refusing the titles, was the Pope denying the primacy of the papacy as some Eastern Orthodox Christians maintain?

RESPONSE: No, Pope St. Gregory the Great was simply affirming the constant Catholic doctrine that individual bishops are truly successors of the apostles and not just agents of the Pope or any other patriarch. However, in doing so, he never denied his primacy, which on other occasions he clearly affirmed, noting, among things, that “the See of Constantinople is subject to the Apostolic See.”

DISCUSSION: Perhaps the best way both to see the Orthodox argument and to answer it is to let St. Gregory speak for himself in his letters. Here we see that, while he does repudiate the title of universal bishop, he does so only insofar as such a title is understood to deny the legitimate authority of the other bishops in their dioceses. The Church has always taught that all bishops are successors of the apostles; their authority is not derived *from* the Pope (though it is his role to confirm the brethren). He writes to John, Patriarch of Constantinople:

Consider I pray thee, that in this rash presumption the peace of the whole Church is disturbed, and that the title of Ecumenical Patriarch is in contradiction to the grace poured out on all in common And thou wilt become by so much the greater as thou restrainest thyself from the usurpation of a proud and foolish title: and thou wilt make advance in proportion as thou are not bent on arrogation by derogation of thy brethren. . . . Certainly Peter, the first of the Apostles, himself a member of the holy and universal Church, Paul, Andrew, John — what were they but heads of particular communities? And yet all were members under one Head . . . (Epistle XVIII).

However, just because Gregory affirms Christ as Head does not mean he is denying his own primacy as the successor of St. Peter, whom Christ established to oversee Church affairs on earth. In fact, later in the same letter, the Pope says that he is prepared to assert his universal authority, if necessary. He points out to John the Faster that he wants to persuade him to change out of a “sense of shame.” But, adds Gregory, “if the detestable and profane assumption could not be corrected through shame, rigorous canonical measures should then be resorted to” (Epistle XVIII).

This is clearly not a mere letter of advice written to an equal. Notice that he doesn’t spend any time arguing that he has the authority to forbid the use of the title. Gregory is aware and he knows that John is aware that he has recourse to “canonical measures” if his direction is not carried out.

Elsewhere, Gregory notes that the Apostolic See, which is a reference to the bishopric of Rome and Pope, is “the head of all the churches.” It is this “See of Peter,” he says, “to whom was committed the care and primacy of the whole Church” (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VI, p. 767).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms the constant teaching of the Church on the primacy of the Pope, teaching that the Successor of Peter has “full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered” (Catechism, no. 882). “The *college or body of bishops* has no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter’s successor, as its head” (*ibid.*, no. 883, emphasis original; cf. nos. 884-85).

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Last edited: 11/96

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