

# DID THE ANCIENT FATHERS GIVE THE PRIMACY TO ROME?

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In discussions on the basis and nature of the Roman primacy, Orthodox and Anglican scholars frequently identify the basis or origin of this primacy—however its responsibilities, authority and geographical extent may be specified (a separate issue)—as: “the ancient Fathers gave the primacy to Rome because it was the imperial city.”<sup>1</sup>

This position relies on an *obiter dictum* of the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451), accounted the fourth ecumenical council, where the bishops there said, in enacting Canon 28: “We, following in all respects and recognizing the canon of the 150 most religious bishops [at the Council of Constantinople, 381] just read, do also define and vote for the same things respecting the privileges of the most holy Church of Constantinople, new Rome. For to the throne of elder Rome, because it was the imperial city, the [ancient]<sup>2</sup> Fathers naturally rendered [*apodedokasi*- can also be translated *gave*<sup>3</sup> -] the first honors; and moved by the same consideration, the 150 most religious bishops assigned equal honor to the most holy throne of the new Rome judging with reason that the city which is honored with the government and senate and enjoys equal privileges with the elder royal Rome, should also be magnified like her in ecclesiastical matters, being second after her: so that...”<sup>4</sup>

In stating that Constantinople (381), accounted the second ecumenical council, gave the primacy to new Rome, the Chalcedonian Fathers<sup>5</sup> relied on Canon 3 of that Council (Constantinople I) which reads: “The bishop of Constantinople shall have the privileges of honor after the bishop of Rome, because it is new Rome.”<sup>6</sup> This canon in turn recalls Canon 6 of Nicaea (325), accounted the first ecumenical council: “Let the ancient customs prevail which are in Egypt and Libya and Pentapolis, according to which the bishop of Alexandria has authority [εξουσια] over all these places. For this is also customary to the bishop of Rome. In like manner in Antioch and in the other provinces, the privileges are to be preserved to the churches.”<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted that in the earliest council (Nicaea) the primacy of Alexandria is described, like that of Rome, as representing “ancient customs.” And, the Council Fathers affirm the same privileges for Antioch and for the other (metropolitan) churches. Whatever primacy Rome enjoyed had already been long in place.

Since neither Nicaea I nor Constantinople I speaks of itself as giving, conceding or granting primacy to (old) Rome, although Constantinople I *may* have implied, as the Chalcedonian Fathers stated,<sup>8</sup> that the ancient “Fathers” gave the Roman Church the primacy and gave it because of that Church’s location in the City of Rome, the imperial capital, we are left only with the statement of the Chalcedonian Fathers in their reasoning for confirming Constantinople’s primacy “after Rome” and extending that Church’s jurisdiction (Canon 28), for this account of the origin of the Roman primacy.

## **Evidence**

The question immediately arises: What is the evidence for saying that the “ancient Fathers gave the primacy to Rome”, and for the reason stated, other than retroactively applying to old Rome the reason for Constantinople I’s granting the primacy to “new Rome”? What testimonies are being relied upon to state as a fact that Rome’s primacy was conferred by the ancient Fathers? Is that designation of source or basis or origin being assumed? Who are the ancient Fathers being implicitly cited?

To be sure, they cannot be the Fathers of Nicaea (325), because they refer to the Roman primacy as already an “ancient custom.” Are there testimonies in the pre-Nicene period telling us how the Roman Church received and on what basis it exercised its primacy—its leadership, preeminent dignity, its recognition as a doctrinal standard, its *εξουσια*?

Relevant extant writings from the pre-Nicene period are relatively few - and the subject of influence, leadership or authority within the communion of local churches, even an episcopal presidency, if any, over a wider area, that of the Empire, could only be in development over this entire period, just as were metropolitan Church structures, Trinitarian and Christological issues, the dissemination of the New Testament Scriptures and the determination of the New Testament

Canon. We must, nevertheless, search out all such testimonies concerning the basis, source or origin of the primacy of the Roman Church. Is this primacy cited as the consequence of the Church's location in the imperial capital and seat of the Roman government? What, if any factor, is cited as the basis for this Church's authority? We take here "ancient Fathers" as including not only bishops but other prominent ecclesiastical leaders and writers of that period.

## Testimonies

The following testimonies, are, in part, summarized in their content as they relate to the basis, origin or source of the Roman primacy.<sup>9</sup> They should be considered progressively and cumulatively.

1. Letter of Clement, A.D. 96: Here a Roman Church leader, generally identified as Clement, its bishop, speaking on behalf of the Church, admonishes, remonstrates with, instructs, and encourages another local Church, Corinth, concerning disorders in that Church. Implicitly the letter asserts a responsibility on the part of Rome for the other local Church. The author invokes the heritage of Peter and Paul, pillars of the Church, called martyrs "of our generation" and the tradition they have passed on to the church. Allusions to the city and the imperial government identify them only as the place and cause of persecution and death for Christians.
2. Ignatius of Antioch, ca. A.D. 115, ultimately to be martyred in Rome, writes to several local churches, including Rome. In his letter to the Roman Church he describes this church as "having the presidency in love," as "clear from all stain," as one who has "taught others"; "I do not enjoin you as did Peter and Paul" (alluding to their key role in the development of the Roman Church). He makes no suggestion that the preeminence of that Church resulted from its presence in the imperial capital or the emperor's presence there. If he were to propose directly a source for Rome's preeminence, it would surely be the ministry and martyrdom of Peter and Paul there.
3. Irenaeus of Lyons, ca. A.D. 185, in *Against the Heresies, Book 3*, the bishop of Lyons (Gaul) states that because

Peter and Paul were the founders of the Roman Church and transmitted the apostolic tradition and ministry through Linus and his successors (as bishops) to the present day, this church, because of that heritage, has preeminent authority in proclaiming a standard of faith which Christians from all over the empire come to be sustained by and to sustain. The translation of this paraphrased passage is, in part, disputed, but the dispute does not affect the point at issue: What is the basis for the preeminence of the Roman Church? It is the decision role and enduring influence of Peter and Paul in the Roman Church. No reference or allusions to the City of Rome or to the imperial government suggest that they played any direct role in causing that preeminence.<sup>10</sup>

4. Victor I, bishop of Rome, A.D. 189–98, sought unity of practice among the Eastern and Western churches on the date for observing Easter. He requested the metropolitans to call synods to resolve this issue. The overwhelming number voted for the Roman (and more general) practice. But the “Asiatic” bishops obstinately refused, whereupon Victor proceeded to excommunicate them, for which he received many strong protests from other bishops, including Irenaeus of Lyons, who favored tolerance of diversity on such an issue. Finally, Victor withdrew these excommunications.

The relevant point that emerges from this controversy is that no other bishop apparently questioned the Roman bishop’s right—his authority, his ἐξουσία, his primacy - to take the action he did, although many disagreed with him and some ignored his decision. Since the Roman Church, as all others, was then suffering severe persecution at the hands of the Roman imperial government, any suggestion that the Roman Church’s location in the imperial city or its proximity to the emperor somehow created or enhanced Victor’s primacy seems fanciful. It is logical to point out that Victor’s ἐξουσία should rather be traced to the heritage of Peter and Paul and that this factor was the basis for his decisive, wide-ranging if precipitous action.

5. Tertullian, distinguished theologian, c. 160–225, writing in his *De Praescriptione*, A.D. 200, teaches, like Irenaeus, that true doctrine can be distinguished from heresy by appealing to the episcopal succession (of teaching) in the apostolic churches. In the course of such an exposition he quotes (for the first time, and more than once, in extant literature) the main Petrine text (Mt. 16:17–18) and cites (among others) the episcopal succession in Rome from Peter (who he says ordained Clement) and “If you are near Italy, you have Rome where authority is at hand for us, too. What a happy church is that one which the apostles poured out their whole doctrine with their blood, where Peter had a like passion with the Lord; where Paul was crowned with the death of John (the Baptist)...” For Tertullian the Roman Church’s distinguishing mark is its heritage from the Apostles Peter and Paul.
6. Origen, 185–254, a theologian, writing ca. A.D. 247 in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, presents one of the earliest expositions of Mt. 16:16–19, which, in some respects fancifully, nonetheless clearly endorses a primacy (of unspecified nature) for Peter, without, however, in that content mentioning the Roman Church, which, according to Eusebius (H.E.6:14), Origen, on another occasion expressed his desire “to see the ancient Church of the Romans.”
7. Cyprian, 199–258, bishop, 248–58, of Carthage in North Africa. In his celebrated work *De Catholicae Ecclesiae Unitate*, of which at least two somewhat different versions exist—the one stressing the equality of all the other apostles with Peter (and therefore the equality of all the bishops) and the second, emphasizing the unique authority of Peter and Peter’s Chair. In this second framework, Cyprian identifies the Roman Church and its bishop as that chair. Some hold both versions of the text to be authentic, the second being written first and then revised by Cyprian to meet his controversial needs. Others hold that text one is the result of a (later) partisan interpolation to advance the cause of the Roman primacy.

This dispute over authenticity, however, does not affect what is said here. Cyprian is cited only to the point that he does identify the Roman Church as the Chair of Peter and the *ecclesia principalis* (first chief or original church), which is resistant, he says, or even impervious to error (letter 591, A.D. 252, to Cornelius, Bishop of Rome), however he variously explains the relationship of the other bishops to the Roman bishop and also their (the other bishops') occupancy in some sense of the Chair of Peter. In this mid-third century, marked by several persecutions of the Church by the Roman government, the Roman Church's preeminence for Cyprian is as the Chair of Peter and the *ecclesia principalis*, how ever qualified, not as the city of Rome and the imperial capital.

These pre-Nicene testimonies sufficiently illustrate the source to which the Church of that period attributed the Roman primacy. Similar and additional testimonies presented and analyzed by S. Herbert Scott in his *The Eastern Churches and the Papacy* lead him to conclude: "The witnesses who have been adduced as to the position of Rome in these first three centuries are all members of the Eastern Churches. Not one of them attributes the authority of the Bishop of Rome to the fact that Rome is the capital of the empire. They speak of the Apostles Peter and Paul; of their martyrdom at Rome.<sup>11</sup> And "it is not till after the founding of Constantinople that the idea arises, even in the East, that the Roman primacy was simply the outcome of the city's political rank."<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Billmeyer-Tüchle, in their *Church History, Vol. I*, conclude: "The idea, originating in the East, and frequently repeated by Protestant scholars (Harnack, Haller, etc.) that the political influence of Rome as capital of the empire was the basis of the special prerogatives of the Roman Church (can. 3 of the Council of Constantinople 381; can.28 of Chalcedon 451; Theodoret, Ep.113), was unknown in this period. Later on such an argument was used as the main reason for the bishop of Constantinople assuming higher rank."<sup>13</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This search for pre-Nicene testimonies that designate the origins of the Roman primacy (without touching the issue of the nature of this primacy) shows that the ancient Fathers and ecclesiastical

writes who address this question, directly or indirectly, even briefly, recognized the Roman primacy already in existence by reason of the ministry and martyrdom of the Apostles Peter and Paul in Rome and the tradition and authority which they transmitted to that Church. As the pre-Nicene era advances (the third century) and the New Testament Scriptures become more widely available, greater emphasis in this recognition is placed on the person of Peter and the office as chief pastor of the Church given him by the Lord Himself.

Whereas it was indeed providential that Peter and Paul should have concluded their ministry in the capital of the empire (rather than, say, in Ephesus, Antioch or Jerusalem), it was not the city of Rome or the presence of the emperor there but rather the two Apostles' personal ministry in the Roman Church, their transmission of the Gospel message and the Gospel ministry and their martyrdom as *Roman churchmen* that resulted in the Roman Church's influence, leadership and authority being recognized as unique among the other Churches. No pre-Nicene testimony points to the capital or to the imperial presence there as a basis for the primacy of the Roman Church. And this was a time generally of severe persecution endured by the Church of Rome and all the other Churches.

On the other hand, Constantinople was elevated to the second place after Rome in the ecclesiastical order precisely because of the city's importance as the new capital of the empire and the seat of the emperor and his government—but now a Christian emperor and a Christian government ready to support and even later to dominate the Church. To say that *new* Rome gained its ecclesiastical eminence and primacy because of the influence of the city and the imperial government's presence there is entirely true; but to apply this reasoning retroactively to the older Rome or imply its factuality in that case is gratuitous, without positive historical testimony and with abundant historical testimony that discredits this claim.

Thus the *obiter dictum* of the Chalcedonian Fathers in enacting Canon 28 to the effect that the ancient Fathers gave the primacy to Rome because Rome was the capital of the empire must be termed a misunderstanding, an assumption not sustained by and indeed contradicted by historical evidence. No external person or group "gave" the primacy to Rome. That primacy, recognized as such, arose from the unique ecclesiastical circumstances of that Church.

The primacy and eminence of Constantinople, on the other hand, clearly derives from its erection as the Emperor Constantine's capital and the seat of his government. Prior to this event, Byzantium, the smaller city already existing on the location and subsumed into the new capital city, was a suffragan see of Heraclea in Thrace and not provably a see of apostolic foundation. The legend of St. Andrew, later introduced to enhance the origin of the Constantinopolitan See, remains a venerable and pious tradition.<sup>14</sup>

## References

1. See Puller, F. W., *The Primitive Saints and the See of Rome*, London, Longmans Green, 1893, pp. 20–21; Meyendorff, Paul, "Primacy in a United Church," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, Vol.52, No.2, 2008, p. 225; Alfeyev, Hilarion, *Primauté et conciliarité dans la tradition orthodoxe*, in *Istina*, 2009, No.1, p. 29, quoting the Council of Chalcedon, 451.
2. The word *ancient* is inserted here to make clear that the Chalcedonian Fathers (451) were not referring to the bishops of Constantinople (381) or those of Nicaea (325) since Nicaea presupposes, when it speaks of the Roman precedence or primacy, that it is already (325) long in existence; it is of "ancient custom."
3. See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, edited W. F. Arndt and E. Wilbur Gingrich, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1957, p. 89.
4. English text in *Documents Illustrating Papal Authority A.D. 96–454*, edited and introduced by E. Giles, London, SPCK, 1952, p. 317. Greek and Latin texts in *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, edited by G. Alberigo et al., Freiburg, im Breisgau, Herder, 1962, pp.75–76, p.28, p.8.
5. The bishops (ca. 600) at Chalcedon were virtually all from the Eastern part of the Empire, including only two bishop-delegates and one priest-delegate from the Bishop of Rome. When the 28<sup>th</sup> canon was enacted in the 11<sup>th</sup> of 16 sessions, 31 Oct. 451, most of the bishops had departed and ca. 190 were left to deliberate on Canon 28.
6. See Note 4; *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta* , p. 28.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
8. See Note 4; *Documents Illustrating Papal Authority*, p. 317.
9. These testimonies are given *verbatim* in Giles, *op.cit.* (Note 4): pp.1–2, 4–5, 9–10, 15–16, 20–22, 23, 26, 27, 40–41.
10. F. W. Puller (see Note 1, 1893 A.D.), citing a few earlier Anglican (and other) divines, maintains that the preeminence of which Irenaeus speaks is that of the City of Rome, the imperial city, not that of the Roman Church. Virtually no subsequent scholars have accepted his reasoning.

11. Scott, S. Herbert, *The Eastern Churches and the Papacy*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1928, p. 70.
12. *ibid.*, p. 41.
13. *Church History*, Vol. I, by Dr. Karl Bihlmeyer, rev. by Dr. Hermann Tüchle, trans. From the 14<sup>th</sup> German edition by V.E. Mills, Westminster, Maryland, 1968, p. 116.
14. Dvornik, Francis, *The Idea of Apostolicity and the Legend of St. Andrew*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1958, pp. 138–209.