

Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner

Section Two Chapter VI The Papacy



This is the continuation of the previous chapter [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter V Peter](#).

1 The Rise of the Papacy

Much of what needs to be said in regard to the papacy has already been covered in the discussion dealing with the church, the priesthood, and Peter. But there remain some further points that should be clarified.

The word "pope," by which the head of the Roman Church is known, and the word "papacy," by which is meant the system of ecclesiastical government in which the pope is recognized as the supreme head, are not found in the Bible. The word "pope" comes from the Latin *papa*, meaning "father." But Jesus forbade his followers to call any man "father" in a spiritual sense: "And call no man your father on the earth: for one is your Father, even he who is in heaven" (Matthew 23:9). For centuries this term was applied to all priests, and even to the present day it is so used in the Eastern Church.

In Italy the term "pope" came to be applied to all bishops as a title of honor, and then to the bishop of Rome exclusively as the universal bishop. It was first given to Gregory I by the wicked emperor Phocas, in the year 604. This he did to spite the bishop of Constantinople, who had justly excommunicated him for having caused the assassination of his predecessor, emperor Mauritius. Gregory, however, refused the title, but his second successor, Boniface III (607) assumed the title, and it has been the designation of the bishops of Rome ever since.

Likewise, the title "pontiff" (as also the term "pontificate," meaning to speak in a pompous manner), which literally means "bridge builder" (*pons*, bridge, and *facio*, make), comes not from the Bible but from pagan Rome, where the emperor, as the high priest of the heathen religion, and in that sense professing to be the bridge or connecting link between this life and the next, was called "Pontifex Maximus." The title was therefore lifted from paganism and applied to the head of the Roman Catholic Church. As the high priest of the Old Testament was the mediator between God and men, so the pope also claims to be the mediator between God and men, with power over the souls in purgatory so that he can release them from further suffering and admit them to heaven, or prolong their suffering indefinitely.

But Christ alone is the mediator between God and men: "For there is one God,

one mediator also between God and men, himself man, Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). And He alone is the true Head of the church. It was He who founded the church and redeemed it with His own blood. He promised to be with His church always, even unto the end of the world. He alone has the perfect attributes needed to fill that high office, for "in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9). "He put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body" (Ephesians 1:22-23). "And he is the head of the body, the church" (Colossians 1:18). For the pope or any other man to claim to be the head of the church and the mediator between God and men is arrogant and sinful.

The papal system has been in process of development over a long period of time. Romanists claim an unbroken line of succession from the alleged first pope, Peter, to the present pope, who is said to be the 262nd member in that line. But the list is in many instances quite doubtful. The list has been revised several times, with a considerable number who formerly were listed as popes now listed as anti-popes. It simply is not true that they can name with certainty all the bishops of Rome from Peter to the present one. A glance at the notices of each of the early popes in the Catholic Encyclopedia will show that they really know little or nothing about the first ten popes. And of the next ten only one is a clearly defined figure in history. The fact of the matter is that the historical record is so incomplete that the existence of an unbroken succession from the apostles to the present can neither be proved nor disproved.

For a period of six centuries after the time of Christ none of the regional churches attempted to exercise authority over any of the other regional churches. The early ecumenical councils were composed of delegates from the various churches who met as equals. There is not a scholar anywhere who pretends to show any decree, canon, or resolution by any of the ecumenical councils which attempts to give preeminence to any one church. The first six hundred years of the Christian era know nothing of any spiritual supremacy on the part of the bishops of Rome. The papacy really began in the year 590, with Gregory I, as Gregory the Great, who consolidated the power of the bishopric in Rome and started that church on a new course. We quote two contemporary church historians, one a Protestant and the other a Roman Catholic, concerning the place of Gregory in this development. Says Professor A. M. Renwick, of the Free Church College, Edinburgh, Scotland:

"His brilliant rule set a standard for those who came after him and he is really the first 'pope' who can, with perfect accuracy, be given the title. Along with Leo I (440-461), Gregory VII (1073-1085), and Innocent III (1198-1216), he stands out as one of the chief architects of the papal system" (*The Story of the Church*, p. 64).

And the Roman Catholic, Philip Hughes, says that Gregory I...

"...is generally regarded as the greatest of all his line. ... It was to him that Rome turned at every crisis where the Lombards [the invaders from the North] were concerned. He begged his people off and he bought them off. He ransomed the captives and organized the great relief services for widows and orphans. Finally, in 598, he secured a thirty years' truce. It was St. Gregory who, in

these years, was the real ruler of Rome and in a very real sense he is the founder of the papal monarchy" (A Popular History of the Catholic Church, p. 75, 1947. Used by permission of The Macmillan Company).

2 The Claims of the Papacy

When the triple crown is placed on the head of a new pope at his "coronation" ceremony, the ritual prescribes the following declaration by the officiating cardinal:

"Receive the tiara adorned with three crowns, and know that thou art the Father of Princes and Kings, Ruler of the World, the Vicar of our Saviour Jesus Christ..." (*National Catholic Almanac*).

The New York Catechism says:

"The pope takes the place of Jesus Christ on earth. ... By divine right the pope has supreme and full power in faith and morals over each and " pastor and his flock. He is the true Vicar of Christ, the head of the entire church, the father and teacher of all Christians. He is the infallible ruler, the founder of dogmas, the author of and the judge of councils; the universal ruler of truth, the arbiter of the world, the supreme judge of heaven and earth, the judge of all, being judged by no one, God himself on earth."

And Pope Leo XIII, in his encyclical, *The Reunion of Christendom* (1855), declared that the pope holds "upon this earth the place of God Almighty."

Thus the Roman Church holds that the pope, as the vicar of Christ on earth is the ruler of the world, supreme not only over the Roman Church itself but over all kings, presidents, and civil rulers, indeed over all peoples and nations. The fact is that on numerous occasions the popes have exercised that authority in countries where the Roman Church was strong. They have excommunicated and deposed kings and governors, and, as in the cases of Queen Elizabeth I of England, and Emperor Henry IV of Germany, they have attempted to arouse rebellions by releasing subjects from any allegiance to their rulers. They have been prevented from exercising such authority in the United States because they do not have control here and because our Constitution serves as a shield against such outside interference.

The pope thus demands a submission from his people, and indeed from all people insofar as he is able to make it effective, which is due only to God. Sometimes that submission takes a particularly servile form, with even the cardinals, the next highest ranking officials in the Roman Church, prostrating themselves before him and kissing his feet! The popes have gone so far in assuming the place of God that they even insist on being called by His names, e.g., "the Holy Father," "His Holiness," etc. Such titles applied to a mere man are, of course, blasphemous and unchristian. We cannot but wonder what goes through the mind of a pope when people thus reverence him, carrying him on their shoulders, kissing his hands and feet, hailing him as the "Holy Father," and performing acts of worship before him. By such means this so-called vicar of Christ" accepts the position of ruler of the world which the Devil offered to Christ, but which Christ spurned with the command,

“Get thee hence, Satan!”

The triple crown the pope wears symbolizes his authority in heaven, on earth, and in the underworld—as king of heaven, king of earth, and king of hell—in that through his absolutions souls are admitted to heaven, on the earth he attempts to exercise political as well as spiritual power, and through his special jurisdiction over the souls in purgatory and his exercise of “the power of the keys” he can release whatever souls he pleases from further suffering and those whom he refuses to release are continued in their suffering, the decisions he makes on earth being ratified in heaven.

It is impossible to denounce strongly enough the folly and guilt of such glorification of man. The papacy, however, is the direct consequence and end result of the exaltation of the priests as necessary mediators between God and men.

But who can really believe that Christ has built His church upon a man? The Bible teaches clearly that Christ’s Vicar on earth is the Holy Spirit—“the Comforter, even the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things” (John 14:26). The Holy Spirit, since He is the third person of the Trinity, has the attributes of wisdom and power which enable Him to perform effectively and perfectly the work of guiding and developing the church of Christ. Christ does not need such a deputy as Rome claims that she has in the pope, and history shows that all men who have attempted to function in that capacity have failed miserably. Over against the claims of Rome the Reformers set the Word of God. Against Rome’s “Thus saith the church,” they placed a “Thus with the Lord.” Luther and Calvin were willing to recognize only Christ as the Head of the Church and denounced the pope as the Antichrist. Indeed, the claims of the pope to universal and total authority over the souls of men and over the church and nations are such that either he is all that he claims to be—the vicar of Christ and the vice-regent of God—or he is the biggest imposter and fraud that the world has ever seen!

3 Worldly Character of the Papacy

The fallacy of the claim that the pope is the vice-regent of Christ is apparent in the glaring contrast between him and Christ. The pope wears, as a fitting symbol of the authority claimed by him, a jewel-laden, extremely expensive crown, while Christ had no earthly crown at all—except a crown of thorns which He wore in our behalf. In solemn ceremonies the pope is carried in a portable chair on the shoulders of twelve men, while Christ walked wherever He needed to go. We cannot imagine Christ, who came not to be ministered unto but to minister, being carried in luxury on the shoulders of men. The pope is adored with genuflections (a bowing of the knee in reverence), he is preceded by the papal cross and by two large fans of peacock feathers, and his garments are very elaborate and costly, all of which is out of harmony with the person and manner of Christ. The pope lives in luxury with many servants in a huge palace in Vatican City, while Christ when on earth “had not where to lay His head.” Many of the popes, particularly during the Middle Ages, were grossly immoral, while Christ was perfect in holiness. Christ said that His kingdom was not of this world, and

He refused to exercise temporal authority. But the pope is a temporal ruler, just like a little king, with his own country, his own system of courts, vassals, coinage, postal service, and a Swiss military guard (100 men in 16th century uniforms) which serves as a papal bodyguard. The popes claim political power, and for many years ruled the Papal States, which stretched all the way across Italy and contained 16,000 square miles and a population of approximately 3,000,000. Those states were confiscated by Italy, under the leadership of the patriot Garibaldi, in 1870, and since that time the popes have been limited to Vatican City, located within the city of Rome, which has an area of about one sixth of a square mile and a permanent population of about 1,000, with some 2,000 more employed there. In maintaining his claim to political power the pope sends ambassadors and ministers to foreign governments, and in turn receives ambassadors and ministers from those governments. As of October 12, 1960, 31 nations maintained ambassadors at the Vatican and received ambassadors from the Vatican, and 11 nations maintained ministers there. In each country to which a papal ambassador is sent Rome seeks to have her ambassador designated as the dean of the diplomatic corps, thus giving him rank above the other ambassadors.

The affairs of the Roman Church are controlled by a bureaucracy that is tightly controlled, completely authoritarian, and self-perpetuating, all of which is in striking contrast with the New Testament principles of church government in which the affairs of the church were in the hands of the people. The pope is elected by the cardinals, who then disband and have no further power to censure any of his actions. New cardinals are appointed by the pope, without necessary consultation with anyone; nor is there any limit on the number of new cardinals that he may appoint, the full number of the college of cardinals having remained at 70 for centuries until recently when pope John XXIII increased the number to 85.¹ The bishops too are appointed by the pope, and may be promoted, moved, demoted, or dismissed as he pleases. The priests and nuns are chosen by the bishops, and are promoted, demoted, or transferred by them, without explanation if they so choose. And the people must be obedient to the priests, although in all of that elaborate system they have no official voice at all, nor is there any official channel through which they can express their ideas or preferences in church affairs. The papacy, therefore, is not a spiritual unity in Christ, but an external unity under the pope, a cloak which covers divisions and dissensions between the various church orders which on occasions have emerged with much rivalry and bitterness.

¹ The number was increased to 134 by pope Paul VI, in 1969, ten of whom are Americans.

We close this discussion of the papacy with a quotation from Dr. Harris which we believe states correctly the New Testament teaching concerning church government and inter-church affairs:

“The fact is that the early church had no head on earth. Christ was their head and they all were brothers. They did have an organization, however, and Presbyterians point to Acts 15 as a splendid example of how it operated. There was a doctrinal question at Antioch. What should the church of Antioch do to settle it? Should they write a letter to Peter asking his decision?

This would be the Romanist position. But they did not. Should they write a letter to the 'college of Apostles'? This is the episcopal position that the bishops by apostolic succession have the whole authority in the church. But Antioch did not do that. Should they call a congregational meeting of the church at Antioch and have the matter decided by the vote of the congregation? That would be the independent theory of church government. But they did not do this either. Rather they sent representatives to a synod meeting held at Jerusalem where the apostles and elders came together to consider the matter. They considered it carefully with prayer and Scripture study. Finally the apostles and elders decided on a policy and gave out decrees to which all the churches were expected to submit (Acts 16:4). There was no primacy of Peter or of anyone else. There was instead a democratic meeting of the ordained leaders of the churches judging matters according to God's Word. This is the Scriptural answer to Roman Catholic pretensions on Peter" (The Bible Presbyterian Reporter, January, 1959).

(Continued in [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter VII Mary Part 1](#))

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