

THE ORIGIN OF THE PRIMACY OF THE PAPACY

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(Brief résumé based on Yves Congar's *Ministères et communion ecclésiale* [Paris: Cerf, 1971, esp. pp.99-109] with some observations of mine)

Before 350 CE, no *universal* church existed. What was referred to as 'the church' was the *local* church rather than the *universal* church (for example, the regional churches rather than the church of Rome). The primary model of the local church was that of 'communion' or 'community' rather than that of 'institution.' The local church was referred to as the *Christian-We* (le *Nous-Chrétien*). At the head of each local church was an *overseer* or *superintendent* (episcopos / *epi* (OVER) *scopus* (SEER) or *epi* (SUPER) *scopus* (INTENDENT) / called today bishop) who presided over the regional churches, and each church within the region was led by *elders* (presbyteroi / presbyters).

(Two remarks: (1) In the Second Testament [NT], no sacramental distinction is made between *episcopoi* and *presbyteroi* [in English today, respectively between *bishops* and *priests*].¹ *In other words, sacramentally, there was nothing a bishop could do that a priest could not do.* (2) Furthermore, the expression 'priest'² [*hierus*] was *exclusively*

¹ See Acts **xx**, 17, 28; I Pet, **v**, 1-2; Phil **i**, 1; I Tim. **iii**; Tit.**i**, 5.

² See, I Pet., **ii**, 9; Rev., **I**, 6; **v**, 10; **xx**, 6. (See also Ex. **xix**, 5-6.)

applied *either* to Jesus [*archierus* / high priest³] or to the entire People of God [the *priestly people*], not to ordained ministers [*presbyteroi* = elders / today called *priests*].)

Before 350 CE, each local church, however, felt the need to commune with one another. This process of communion was part of the bishop's or episcopal role. And all the bishops together (the college of bishops) were the symbol of the communion process within the local churches.

Consequently, the bishop had two relational functions. As head of his regional church, he related to that church as a leader. And as symbol of unity, he related to the universal church as a facilitator of communion among the local churches. Thus his ministry was one of 'order,' not in the sense of personal power over the church, but in the sense that he was 'ordained' (*ordinatus ad*) both for the leadership of the local church and as symbol of communion among the churches. As a symbol of communion, the bishops had for a function to bring together the members of their respective local churches in communion with one another toward the building a universal.

Historically speaking, among the local churches, one church

³ See, Heb., **ii**, 17; **iii**, 1; **iv**, 15; **v**, 1-10; **vii**, 24-27.

eventually emerged as a model for the other churches. That church was the church of Rome. The church of Rome came to be seen as a court of appeal. As such, at times it intervened in the activities of local churches. The eventual preeminence of the church of Rome -- as expressed in dogmatic statements -- is the *de facto* recognition of its leadership role *among* and *by* the local churches.

With the Council of Nicea (325) and the Constantinian peace, the church organized itself according to structures modeled on the Roman government and these structures eventually became fixed. After 343 (the Council of Sardica), the church of Rome began to call itself the Head church (*caput ecclesia*). That meant that it saw itself not only as 'presiding in love' over the other churches, but also as a church which was *qualitatively* different from the other churches. It had a *universal character* as opposed to the other churches which were *merely local in character*. The church of Rome, rather than seeing itself as the *symbol* of unity for all the local churches, began to see itself as the *source* of the other churches, that is, the church that gave life to the other churches. The bishop of the church of Rome began to see himself as the reincarnation of Peter, the vicar of Peter.

After the 9th century, with the institution of the cardinals, the concept of the bishops together -- (the college of bishops) as a sign of

unity among the local churches -- began to disappear. The cardinals -- with the pope, the bishop of Rome-- took over the governance of all the local churches. The cardinals were looked upon as the twelve apostles around the pope (the bishop of Rome) who was seen as the *vicar of Christ*.

At this point, the relationship of the bishop with his local church gave way to the relation of the bishop with the bishop of Rome, the pope, as governor of the universal church. The church became one people under a unique head, the bishop of Rome. The 'order' in the church (i.e. the sacrament of ordination) came to be seen as a personal power over the church rather than a relational gift at the service of the church. Ordination conveyed the *power* to sanctify, to govern, and to teach rather than providing a *facilitating ministry* at the service of God's Priestly People.