

23. Development of Roman Catholicism & Eastern Orthodoxy 313-800 A.D.

FIRST SEEDS OF THE IDEA OF THE PAPACY

The original Christian worship as taught by Christ and His disciples left no room for the idea of the papacy or of the primacy of any particular bishop. Christ had taught, "One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren." (Matthew 23:8-10). He said His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36) and denied attempts to make him king by force (John 6:15). It is highly improbably in fact, that Peter (who is claimed by Catholics as the first Pope in Rome) was ever bishop of Rome. After all, the Apostle Paul sent greetings from the believers in Rome to the churches. It is inconceivable that if Peter had been there and was in fact Pope, that Paul would have or could have ignored him thus. The idea of Peter being the first Pope is not mentioned by one of the Apostolic Fathers, but is a much later idea. Thus the four ancient lists we have of bishops in Rome are partly contradictory one to another, because they were formed trying to impose later ideas on earlier history.

However, the political yearnings of the Roman bishops for power is very old. One of the earliest attempts of the Roman bishop to lord it over the others occurred in the Easter controversy toward the end of the second century. Victor, bishop of Rome, tried to order the Eastern churches to observe the Resurrection of Christ on the same day as Western Christians, but they refused. Victor then excluded them from fellowship with Roman Christians, but he had no power to break their fellowship with the other churches. Victor was admonished by Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, and he backed off. The controversy was finally resolved by joint consent of the churches at the Council of Nice. It is obvious, then, that neither the eastern nor western churches recognized the Bishop of Rome as having any special authority over them at that time.

Augustine of Hippo said that the rock on which the church was built was Peter's confession of faith, that is, Jesus Himself. Hilary gave the same interpretation.

In the middle of the third century, another incident arose which shows that Christians still did not consider the Bishop of Rome as the Head of the Church. There was a dispute between Bishop Stephen of Rome and Bishop Cyprian of Carthage over the validity of baptism administered by heretics.

The practice of the African and Asian churches was to rebaptize those converted from heresy, but the European churches only laid hands on them when the African and Asian churches made a law which was contrary to the custom practiced in the European and Roman churches. Bishop Stephen of Rome was furious, but the churches held their ground and the Council of Carthage in 256 upheld their decision. Thus the churches refused to recognize the Bishop of Rome as ruler over them. Both the African/Asian bishops and the general church council contradicted him.

There was also a move before the end of the fourth century to refer questions to church leaders in consideration of apostolic descent. In other words, those leaders were considered with greater favor who received their posts in a direct line from one of the apostles. A key element in this move was the Donatist controversy over appropriate treatment of Christians who had lapsed in

time of persecution and later sought restoration. The established church proposed leniency, but many rejected this idea and formed other churches.

The church historian Eusebius also spent much time showing that the bishoprics of Rome, Alexandria and Jerusalem went back directly to the apostles.

Still another incident shows that as late as 415 the Bishop of Rome still had no special power which was recognized by the churches. Apiarius, Bishop of Sicca in North Africa, was deposed from his position for immorality and fled to Rome, tried to demand that the African churches reopen his case, claiming that the Bishop of Rome had the privilege of requiring the church to reopen cases on request. The African bishops refused, asserting that all the churches were independent.

The Greek term *papas* (father) had been commonly used as a general title for all of the bishops. Siricius, ca 384, was the first who used it as an official title. Later, after 600, the title was claimed exclusively by the bishops of Rome.

Thus, during the first four centuries there was only a limited idea of the supremacy of the bishop of Rome, and this in spite of strong influences of Romanization. The supremacy of the Roman bishop was due to the fact that the city was the capitol and the most influential in the Empire. On that same ground, the Council of Chalcedon (451) gave the Bishop of Constantinople equal power with the Bishop of Rome. The declaration of Chalcedon was extremely odious to Leo, bishop of Rome at the time, who wanted full power over all the churches, but he had no power to stop or influence it. Yet strangely enough this very decision helped to extend the power of the Roman bishops, for its result was to make a despot of the bishop of Alexandria, who like the Roman popes of later years, could not handle power. Any of the churches, then, withdrew from Alexandria's influence and appealed to the bishops of Rome, thus gradually enabling Rome to extend its influence to the east.

In 588 John, Bishop of Constantinople, assumed the title of universal bishop for himself in a great power play. Gregory, bishop of Rome, probably jealous of not having thought of it first himself, opposed John bitterly, calling the title "vain," "execrable," "anti-Christian," "blasphemous," "infernal," "diabolical," "haughty," and "new and profane."

He did not argue, however, that it belonged to the Bishop of Rome rather than the Bishop of Constantinople! Rather he said that no true saint would presume to accept it and that none of the Roman bishops had ever claimed such a title. He said, "whoever adopts or affects the title of universal bishop has the pride and character of Anti-Christ."

Each segment of the church refused to recognize the other, so that questions arose over which of them were the "true and legitimate church." For these reasons Cyprian wrote most of his works that gave the church the idea of authority handed down from the apostles.

References for Chapter XVI, The Apostolic Father to 600 A.D.

1. WHC Frend, THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1981.
From Time Tables

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM (600 ON)

The Fall of Rome

In 454, the city of Rome was sacked by barbarian forces from the north. 476 marked the end of the Roman Empire as the Emperor was deposed and banished by the Gothic conqueror. Before the fall of Rome, the Roman bishops appealed to their “rights” as leaders of the church in the capitol of the Empire. After the fall, not wishing to lose and even hoping to expand their powers, they found it necessary to claim power on other bases.

The fall of Rome contributed even more to the rapid paganization of the church. The conquering heathen had ascribed an almost godlike quality to their own sorcerers. They now transferred those qualities to their conception of the Roman primate. The church accepted a great and tragic compromise. The conquering barbarians accepted the name Christian, and in return, the church left them with their pagan practices, now baptized “christian.”

Boniface had succeeded Gregory as bishop of Rome, and he quickly applied to the Emperor Phocas to have the “blasphemous title” of universal bishop applied to himself, with the privilege of passing it on to his successors

The Emperor had a grudge against the bishop of Constantinople so he forbade him to use the title he had invented and gave it instead to Boniface (606 A.D.) He then declared the bishop of Rome to be the head over all the other churches. Before 606, Rome had no real power to impose its will on anyone, regardless of the political ambitions of the Roman bishops. Therefore, the heathen practices which were received in one church might be rejected totally in another. Many kinds of worship were observed by the various churches. After 606, Rome began to impose its will, resulting in total acceptance of pagan traditions and uniformity in practice.

Much later, in the 1800’s, as the Roman Catholic Church met at Vatican I to consider the issue of papal infallibility, ultramontanes addressed to Pope Pius IX hymns which had previously been addressed to God. (See 2 Thess. 2:4). Gaspard Mermillod, suffragan bishop of Geneva, spoke of a threefold incarnation of the Son of God: in the virgin’s womb, in the eucharist, and in the Pope! The pope was even called the redeemer. St. John Bosco called him “God on earth” and declared, “Jesus has put the pope on the same level as God.”