

Roman Papal Primacy: Obstacle or Bridge to Unity?¹

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Abstract

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Papal primacy is frequently rejected because of a conviction that it is not grounded in Scripture or Tradition, or because of a misinterpretation of Catholic teaching on the subject, or because of the way in which the primacy has been exercised. Paragraph 95 of *Ut unum sint* speaks of a way of exercising the primacy which would retain what is essential to the accomplishment of its mission while being open to a new situation. The author of the present article interprets these "essentials," outlining the teaching of Florence, Vatican I and II, and analyzing some misinterpretations of their decrees. He then discusses how a devolution of authority, a bolstering of collegiality, and a renewed stress on service by Rome might make papal primacy more acceptable to its detractors.



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Introduction

On a number of occasions Pope Paul VI publicly referred to papal primacy as an obstacle on the path towards the unity of all Christians. At the very beginning of his pontificate, in *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), he wrote: "It fills our heart with sorrow that my brothers separated from communion with the Apostolic See think that we ourselves, while supporting the idea of reconciliation, are actually an obstacle to it because of the primacy of honour and jurisdiction which Christ conferred on the Apostle Peter and which we have received in succession to him. Do not some people say that, if the primacy of the Bishop of Rome were abolished, it would be easier for the separated Churches to be united with the Catholic Church in a single body?"² Cardinal Ratzinger also referred to "the papacy, the chief obstacle for non-Catholic Christians."² Pope John Paul has made similar statements.

Why should this be the case? Why do people consider papal primacy as a serious obstacle to unity? Why is the papacy not the bridge to unity that so many Christians would like to see?

There are, I think, three main reasons for this in the minds of Christians who are not Roman Catholics:

1. There are those who reject the whole idea of the Primacy of the Bishop of Rome because, in their view, this has no firm foundation either in Holy Scripture or in the early tradition of the Church. Papal Primacy developed in the medieval Church. There are those who maintain that the dogmatic constitution of Vatican I, *Pastor Aeternus*, particularly with regard to infallibility, simply cannot be reinterpreted in such a way as to make it acceptable to other Christians. "It must be thrown overboard" and quietly forgotten – along with some of the

² Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (Middlegreen, Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1988), 32.

Thirty Nine Articles and parts of the Westminster Confession!!³

2. There are others who are outspoken in their rejection of Papal Primacy, but what they reject is not always quite what Roman Catholics hold and teach about the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. The German Chancellor Bismarck and Mr. Gladstone provide two illustrious examples of such misunderstanding in the last century after the First Vatican Council and its definition of papal primacy and papal infallibility. But similar misunderstandings are still around.
3. Then there are those who, while accepting the idea of a Petrine Ministry and a Primacy of the Bishop of Rome as well founded in Scripture and Tradition, cannot accept the Roman Primacy as this has been exercised for centuries and is still being exercised today. The objection here is not so much to the fact of Papal Primacy, but to what they consider exaggerated claims and authoritarian exercise of the Primacy.⁴ Objections are made also to the highly centralized administration of the Church by the Roman Curia.

In his most recent encyclical letter, *Ut unum sint*, on the importance of the ecumenical dialogue, Pope John Paul II invites all who call themselves disciples of Christ to redouble their commitment to achieving the full unity of all Christians. He

³ Prof. Sir Owen Chadwick in a review of J.M.R. Tillard's *The Bishop of Rome* in the *The Journal of Theological Studies* 35 (1984): 272.

⁴ There are many Anglicans who do not object to the primacy of the Bishop of Rome as such. "Much Anglican objection has been directed against the manner of exercise and particular claims of the Roman primacy rather than against universal primacy as such." C. Hill and E.J. Yarnold, SJ, eds., *Anglicans and Roman Catholics: The Search for Unity* (London: SPCK/CTS, 1994), 160. Also the Orthodox do not deny some sort of primacy to the Apostolic See of Rome. These suggest that Rome does have a primacy of love but not supremacy of "external power and jurisdiction." See Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, revised edition (London: Pelican, 1993), 27. It is not clear, however, precisely what is meant by the expressions: "primacy of honour" and *primus inter pares*.