

Review Essay

Eastern Ecclesial Polity: A Review Essay

Books Reviewed in this Essay

Daniel D. Benjamin, *The Patriarchs of the Church of the East: Dinkha III not IV*, trans. from Assyrian into English by Youel A. Baaba (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006).

Michael Burgess, *The Eastern Orthodox Churches: Concise Histories with Chronological Checklists of Their Primates* (London and Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers and Company Incorporated, 2005), 324+ pp.

Nicholas Ferencz, *American Orthodoxy and Parish Congregationalism* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), 234+ pp.

John Mason Neale, *A History of the Holy Eastern Church: the Patriarchate of Antioch* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2003), 229+ pp.

Questions of rank and succession and a rather crude jockeying for position started even before the head of the Church had ascended to His Father (cf. Luke 9:46–48 and Mark 10:35–45) and such questions have continued down through the ages. The matter of orthodox leadership and valid apostolic lineage was famously taken up by Saint Irenaeus of Lyons – whom Hans Urs von Balthasar has called the

Church's first *systematic* theologian¹ – in *Adversus Haereses* (III.3.1–3) where he tells us that

we can list those who were appointed by the Apostles to be bishops in the churches and their successors to our own day.... But since it would be extremely long in a book such as this to give the succession list for all the churches (we shall take just one), the greatest and most ancient church, known to all, founded and established at Rome by the two most glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul.... The blessed Apostles after founding and providing for the church, handed over the leadership and care of the church to Linus ... Anacletus succeeded him. Next, in the third place from the Apostles, Clement received the episcopate.... To this Clement succeeded Evaristus; to Evaristus, Alexander, and then, sixth from the Apostles, Sixtus. After him came Telesphorus.... And then Hyginus; afterwards Pius, and after him, Anicetus. After Soter had succeeded Anicetus, then came Eleutherus who now holds the episcopate and twelfth from the Apostles. By this order and succession, the tradition of the Apostles in the Church and the preaching of the truth have come down to us. And this is a most complete demonstration that one and the same life-giving faith which is in the Church from the Apostles until now has been preserved and handed down in truth.

This issue of valid succession and apostolicity which so animated Irenaeus and some of the other early Fathers² is an issue that haunts us still. Whenever such questions have periodically arisen at various points, one of the Church's responses has been to produce episcopal genealogies tracing out

¹ See the second volume of Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: a Theological Aesthetics*, 7 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983–91).

² See Francis A. Sullivan, S.J. *From Apostles to Bishops: the Development of Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York: Paulist, 2001), 81–170 especially.

the succession of leaders from the apostolic age to our own.³ To the extent that they are still amassed today, such lists are usually produced by Catholic and Orthodox Churches – though such lists have sometimes been created by other Christians as well to demonstrate their *bona fides*.⁴ Most Catholic libraries will have today such works as the various official Catholic directories of national hierarchies⁵, which are often compiled when these Churches are young and eager to demonstrate their apostolic lineage, as well as the yearbook of the Vatican, the *Pontificio Annuario*, which carries the official lists of and information about Catholic bishops and popes and their titles and offices, and changes to which can often set off ecumenical storms.⁶

³ Today those lists are increasingly compiled online. Their accuracy and authority is a matter of debate. Two of the more widely consulted sites are www.catholic-hierarchy.org and Charles Bransom's "Apostolic Succession in the Roman Catholic Church" at <http://mysite.verizon.net/res7gdmc/aposccs/index.html>. For a very recent example of the level of detail involved – or felt to be necessary in those palpably unsure of their orders – see the lengthy document "The Apostolic Succession of the Most Reverend Wynn Wagner III, *Episcopus Vagans*," who documents in excruciating detail the purported "twenty-two" possible lines of apostolic succession he claims to have inherited from everyone from "Uniate" Catholics to Byzantine and Oriental Orthodox as well as various schismatic "Catholic" groups. See http://www.global.org/Pub/Bp_Wynn_Wagner_Apostolic_Succession.pdf.

⁴ The controverted question of Anglican ordinations prompted several books and pamphlets well into the twentieth century anxiously laying forth the evidence in favour of their validity and of their bishops having valid apostolic succession. See, e.g., Charles Chapman Grafton, *The Lineage from Apostolic Times of the American Catholic Church, Commonly Called the Episcopal Church* (Milwaukee, WI: Young Churchman, 1911); and "The Episcopal Succession of the Church of England," <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~ucgbmxd/success1.htm>. Other Christian traditions, including certain Lutheran strands as well as the Old Catholics, occasionally feel the need to produce such "apologetic" lists and tracts as well. Several of these are self-published on the Internet.

⁵ E.g., James Darragh, *The Catholic Hierarchy of Scotland: a Biographical List, 1653–1985* (Glasgow: John S. Burns and Sons, 1986); John Hugh O'Donnell, *The Catholic Hierarchy of the United States, 1790–1922* (New York: AMS Press, 1974, 1922.); and *Annuaire de l'Église catholique au Canada* (Montreal: Novalis, 1983–).

⁶ Such a storm was generated – needlessly in my opinion – in March 2006 when the title page of the *Annuario* quietly dropped a traditional title, "Patriarch of the West," causing no small confusion and anxiety among the