

The Understanding of Papal Supremacy as revealed in the Letters of Pope Gregory the Great

by Graham Nicholson

By the end of the sixth century, the city of Rome had been without the emperor in residence for over 250 years and itself outside the empire for a period of nearly seventy years before the disastrously liberating twenty years of war under the policies of the Emperor Justinian. The years of absent emperors and barbarian government had forced the Bishop of Rome to seek out a new identity, and had allowed that to happen free from the constraints of immediate imperial control. With the emperor's departure, and Constantinople's subsequent claim to be the "New Rome" with all the attendant ecclesiastical privileges at Constantinople in 381, some new rationale for Roman primacy was needed. Pope Damasus I (366-384) promptly convened a council which replied that primacy was not a matter of synodical decree but of apostolic foundation and divine decree.¹ To this Pope Leo I (440-461) added a juristic basis with the idea of personal legal succession of monarchical government.² What was once Peter's was now inheritable, and an ongoing reality. The Christian *corpus* was founded on the Petrine commission and the emperor as a member of that *corpus* was charged with its protection.

Other early Popes after Leo continued to build on these claims, helped by ecclesio-political events in Constantinople. In 482 Emperor Zeno issued his *Henotikon* as an attempt to ease growing political pressures from the monophysite "wing" of the eastern Church. In it he sought to define the substance of the Christian faith in terms of the first three Ecumenical Councils but without any reference to Chalcedon, and without any recourse to a Church council or to the then pope, Simplicius I (468-483). The subsequent silence from Constantinople in response to Simplicius' protests led to the excommunication of the patriarch and the reciprocal excommunication of the pope. The resulting Acacian schism was to last for thirty five years and provided the background for renewed papal concerns for the primatial integrity of the Roman See.

After Acacius' death, P. Felix III (489-492) wrote to the emperor "as an anxious father desiring the welfare and prosperity of my most clement son."³ However the same letter also saw fit to mention that he did have the power to wrest concessions by virtue of being "vicar of blessed Peter" and "by the authority of the apostolic power as it were."⁴ His successor Gelasius I (492-496) wrote a strongly worded letter to Emperor Anastasis which reminded him that he was but one of two powers in the governing of the world, and by far the greater responsibility lay with the priests. Accordingly the Emperor "... ought to submit ... rather than rule, and in these matters ... should depend on their [*ie* those in charge of divine affairs] judgement rather than seek to bend them to your will."⁵

¹ Ullmann, *A Short History of the Papacy*, London, Methuen, 1972, pp 10-11.

² Ullmann, *Short History*, p 19. See also "Leo I and the theme of Papal Primacy", *Journal of Theological Studies*, 11(1960):25-51.

³ Richards, *The Popes and Papacy, Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, p 62.

⁴ Richards, *The Popes and Papacy* p.62.

⁵ in Richards, J., *The Popes and the Papacy*, p 21. W. Ullmann *Short History*, pp 32-4 saw this as clear evidence for "the Great Charter of the medieval papacy" whereas Richards, arguing from the same data saw nothing more than evidence for Gelasius' fiery temperament!

The divisions which occurred within the Church between the supporters of Laurentius and Symmachus for the papal office after Anastasius II's death can be variously explained.⁶ However it is clear from the publication of the so called Symmachan forgeries that at least some of antagonists saw the issue as an opportunity to press new papal claims.⁷ In the same way the *Liber Pontificalis* begun in the sixth century represents an attempt to construct a romanticised history of the papacy in line with new claims of primacy as far back as Peter himself.⁸

By the time Gregory the Great succeeded Pelagius II to the papacy in 590 this turn in the Roman Church's self perception had become well established. It was a part of the practice of the true faith, even if it was not accepted (or even acknowledged) elsewhere. Thus it is not surprising that the many writings of Gregory reflect on the nature of the Church, the nature of ecclesiastical office and the inner nature of the office bearer. While in Constantinople as *apocrisarius* for Pelagius II, Gregory began his *magnum opus*, an extensive interpretive and allegorical exposition on the book of Job and its application to life under the hand of God. When completed the work distilled many years of careful reflection and observation on the contemplative life.

Shortly after Gregory took office as Bishop of Rome, John, bishop of Ravenna wrote to Gregory apparently criticising him for his tardiness in taking the position. In response Gregory issued his *Pastoral Rule*, which set forth his understanding of the doctrine of ecclesiastical office and its attendant responsibilities.⁹ This treatise was to become widely circulated in his lifetime as a "manifesto" of the nature of Christian office, whether in the Church or in any other sphere of Christian administration. Gregory himself sent a copy to Spain, and Anastasius of Antioch translated it into Greek for the Eastern Church.¹⁰

From the *Pastoral Rule*, it is clear that Gregory viewed ecclesiastical office in general and that of the Roman See in particular as something divinely given. He also believed that it was only ever given to those who were suitably gifted for the office, however they might think otherwise, and that if it was so given, it was a matter of duty for the incumbents to fulfil the task to the best of their ability. Thus, though he protested his own inadequacies strongly, there was no question that once received, his office was to be respected and honoured, not only by others but also by his own actions. All office bearers could, and should be called to account. Humility did not translate into weakness, excuse or silence.

⁶ Richards, *The Popes and the Papacy* p 69-99 sees only political manoeuvrings, whereas Ullmann *Short History*, p 38ff presents an ecclesiastical explanation.

⁷ King Theoderic's synod ended up declaring that the apostolic see could be judged by no-one.

⁸ Davis, R. trans. *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis)* Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1989. See also Moorhead, J. "Papa as 'Bishop of Rome'" *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 36(1985): 337-350, who sees a transition in the use of the title Papa (pope) culminating in the mid 6th century so that in Roman useage it then came to stress the office rather than the person of the office holder.

⁹ "The Book of the Pastoral Rule and Selected Epistles" James Barmby trans., *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vols XII and XIII., Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1983 (repr.). In doing so Gregory was following the example of Gregory of Nazianus and John Chrysostom See Gregory Nazianzen's "Orations", *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol vii pp 203-227, and Chrysostom's "On the Priesthood" *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol ix, pp 33-83. Whether he was aware of these precedents we do not know.

¹⁰ Ep V.49 to Leander of Seville. and Ep. XII.24. The Rule continued to be popular throughout the Middle Ages, and beyond. Thus for example, John Calvin, not noted for his sympathies with the Roman Church could quote extensively and approvingly from Gregory's *Pastoral Rule* in his chapters on the Church in the later editions of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

However it is his surviving letters which are the focus of this study.¹¹ Written throughout his pontificate on all manner of subjects from the “greatest” to the “least” of matters by one always aware of the privileges and responsibilities thrust upon him, they provide an excellent opening into his view of office. They became, as it were, an interface where the loftiness and struggles of Gregory’s inner idealism met the problems of the everyday life.

It was customary for new patriarchs to issue an accession letter on elevation to office. While largely formal in structure, it provided an opportunity to set out any matters of concern and highlight new expectations. Gregory addressed his to his fellow patriarchs at Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. But in this letter, there are only indirect references to the office of the Roman See, and the debates which would later arise. These are where the letter quotes large portions of his *Pastoral Rule*. Thus there are allusions to the need for priests to follow the examples of those who trod before “lest he advance the foot of his conduct beyond the limits of order”¹², leaders being “chief in action”¹³ and responsible for “the unity of the faith”¹⁴, and advised to follow the examples given by the first pastor, [Peter].¹⁵ Supreme rule was “ordered well when he who presides lords it over vices rather than over his brethren”¹⁶ The letter also professed Gregory’s orthodoxy by adhering to the faith defined by the four ecumenical councils which were likened to the four gospels, and deserving of similar reverence. In keeping with the pressures of the day, he only made passing reference to the Fifth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 553. Instead of any bold papal claims, there was a protestation of his inadequacy for the task and pleas for their prayerful intercession lest “the weight of office oppress me beyond my strength.” The whole tone of the letter was brotherly but firm, but it also serves to explain something of the thinking behind Gregory the Pope.

Other early letters from Gregory’s first years in office show the degree of administrative involvement demanded by the affairs of the Papal patrimony, situated largely in Sicily. However, they are mainly matters which might involve any bishop overseeing a large see, and merely serve to show something of the vast capacity Gregory had for detail, and his concern for wise and accountable stewardship of resources. Only letters to the Bishop of Aquileia and Salona, and to the exarch at Ravenna anticipate later matters.

It is not until letters written towards the close of the second year that Gregory began addressing the political, theological and ecclesiastical themes which revealed his further understanding of the papal privileges in the Church. This was probably quite deliberate.¹⁷ Besides addressing what he believed to be serious challenges to the

¹¹The collection of letters used here is found in “The Book of the Pastoral Rule and Selected Epistles” James Barmby trans., *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vols XII and XIII, *op cit*. Numbering differs slightly from the definitive Latin collection but the dating is by and large the same. Letters are arranged according to the Roman practice of reckoning by indiction (ie fifteen year periods), each year within an indiction being identified (1st, 2nd indiction, and so on). Thus Book I (9th Indiction) refers to the period from September 590 to August 591, with each new book beginning a new year.

¹² Rule II.2.

¹³ Rule II.3.

¹⁴ Rule II.4.

¹⁵ Rule II.5.

¹⁶ Rule II.6.

¹⁷ See Ep I.6 to the Patrician Narses. The context is obscure, but he refers to the inadvisability of beginning with complaints from the outset of his pontificate. The letter also refers to a matter his apocrisarius Honoratus was to bring up with “them” at a seasonable time. It is tempting to make the connection with the matter of the Universal Bishop, which a later apocrisarius Sabinianus was to take up “by word of mouth” (Ep V.18) but the matter must be left open.

authority of the Roman See, they refer to other doctrinal controversies, dealings with the Emperor and invading Lombards, the progress of the catholic faith in Gaul, and to the task of missions. It is to those matters that we now turn.

Some time towards the end of 594 Gregory took issue with John, Patriarch of Constantinople, over his personal use of the title Universal Bishop. It is clear that Gregory had been seeking to persuade John to desist long before this letter, using the services of his *apocrisarius* Sabianus as a go between.¹⁸ The title was itself not new, and had been used occasionally during the fifth century and its usage by the patriarchs of Constantinople appears to date from the Acacian schism.¹⁹ Nor was Roman protest new.²⁰ John had assumed the title in 587 following a synod at Constantinople, and according to Gregory's account, mentioned in a letter to fellow patriarchs Eulogius of Alexandria and Anastasius of Antioch, this usurpation was quite deliberate; a part of his "seeking occasion from another cause".²¹ The implication was clear; out of a "new act of pride" Constantinople's old claims were rising again with a consequent threat to Rome's honour.

Gregory's rebuke to John was couched in brotherly terms, but it was clearly the rebuke of one who believed he was John's superior in a very real sense and that on any reasonable account he ought to be obeyed stating "He who teaches truth has not consented to teach himself, even when I implore him." It is interesting to note, however, that throughout the long letter, with its extensive biblical arguments against the subtleties and destructiveness of devilish pride, there were no reference to any texts which purported to bolster Petrine superiority. On this Gregory was silent. The letter concluded with what may be construed as a veiled threat and a hint of further, more public rebuke: "But if I am despised in my reproof, it remains that I must have recourse to the Church" Just what this meant was not specified.

There was also the assertion that the Council of Chalcedon, Gregory's favourite final recourse in all doctrinal matters, made specific provision for this title to be applied to the "prelates of this Apostolic See" (ie. Rome) but that "not one of them has ever wished to be called by such a title or seize upon this ill advised name ...".²² The implication was clear. John, out of "rash presumption" and "contradiction of grace" was claiming papal privileges that even Peter's legitimate successors had refused to accept out of their love and concern for the church. Such an attitude was opposed to the Spirit of Christ, and without actually saying so directly, Gregory clearly suggested that such titles were marks of the Antichrist by his partial quote from 1 John 2:18 "Little children it is the last hour".²³ But God would triumph, so that John ought to desist from his rebellion before it was too late.

The Patriarch's claim had political implications too, as John had evidently persuaded the Emperor Maurice to urge Gregory to drop the matter and be reconciled.

¹⁸ Ep V.18.

¹⁹ Hanlon, C., *Dreams and Realities*, M.A. Thesis, University of Queensland, 1990, p 105.: "In this context it might be assumed that the use of the title indicated a certain declaration of independence of the See of Constantinople from the Bishop of Rome, but the title survived the healing of the schism without any offence to Rome being either contemplated or perceived. During the sixth century it seems to have been a common appellation of the Bishop of Constantinople."

²⁰ Pelagius II had protested, (see Ep IX.68), possibly advised by Gregory.

²¹ Ep. V.43.

²² With regard to the different versions of just what Chalcedon had said on the matter, Gregory accepted the Roman version, suggesting strongly that the Greek Church's variants were cleverly contrived falsifications. Ep. V.14.

²³ The text goes on to read "and as you have heard that Antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know it is the last hour." RSV.

In response Gregory wrote separate letters to both the Emperor²⁴ and to his wife Constantina²⁵ and a further one to Sabianus which suggested that the whole matter might be part of a cunning plot to incite the Emperor against him.²⁶ As visible proof of the ongoing breach the earlier ban on shared communion with the patriarch was to remain.

In the letter to Maurice, Gregory made the subtle but obvious gibe that Peter's primacy was apparent "to all who know the gospel" and that it was by the Lord's voice [that] the care of the whole church was committed to "the holy Apostle and Prince of all the Apostles, Peter." Furthermore, if Peter had never called himself Universal Apostle, how much more should John refrain from being Universal Bishop! The Emperor might have been more inclined to take notice had not Gregory added the observation that in the past many "priests of the Constantinopolitan Church have fallen into the whirlpool of heresy and have become not only heretics but heresiarchs", among them Nestorius and Macedonius!²⁷ A church that had fallen into such grievous error in the past could hardly provide the Universal Church with guaranteed leadership, and would have dragged the Universal Church into error. As before there was the vague suggestion that one who so wrongs the Universal Church may need "to be coerced". Gregory's appeal to the empress was softer in tone. It commended her reported support for and interest "the cause of the blessed Prince of the Apostles ... against certain persons who are proudly humble ..." as an indication of her wisdom and concern for her eternal salvation.²⁸

In the letter written to the Patriarchs Eulogius and Anastasius, Gregory again cited the alleged Chalcedonian decree. However he now argued not only from Church history but out of a stated concern for the integrity of their own Sees, for "... if one Patriarch is called Universal, the name of Patriarch in the case of the rest is derogated."²⁹ The continued appeal to these two sees hinged upon the convenient tradition associating both cities with the apostle Peter so that they were now obliged to support Peter's honour through Rome as if it were their own. Despite Gregory's strong exposition of the history of this relationship and its present implications, neither appears to have been convinced. His equality was, after all, still hierarchical.³⁰ Eulogius did not even bother to reply to the first letter on the matter,³¹ and although Anastasius had replied, he evidently believed the matter was "of no consequence".³² To add insult to injury, Eulogius later referred to Gregory himself as Universal Pope³³ and continued to ignore the issue of Constantinople in correspondence.³⁴

John of Constantinople died in 596, but that did not resolve the dispute. Gregory continued to pursue concessions from the Emperor and the new Patriarch Cyriacus, as well as continued support from Antioch and Alexandria but to no avail.³⁵ There the matter rested for four years, Gregory apparently unsure how to proceed,

²⁴ Ep V.20.

²⁵ Ep V.21.

²⁶ Ep V.19.

²⁷ Ep V.20.

²⁸ Ep V.21.

²⁹ Ep. V.43.

³⁰ Ep VII.40 Peter "established" Alexandria through Mark, "adorned" Antioch by his seven year episcopate, but "exalted" Rome through his death. The hierarchy is clear.

³¹ Ep VI.60.

³² Ep VII.27. Gregory likened Anastasius' reply to a bee, in that "it contained both honey and a sting".

³³ Ep VIII.30.

³⁴ Ep IX.78.

³⁵ See Epp VII.4, 5 to Cyriacus, Ep VII.6 & 33 to Maurice, Ep VII.27 to Anastasius and Epp VII.34 & 40 to Eulogius.

having realized that he was drawing support from no-one of any consequence. His early hints of coercion had proved empty words, and the wider Church clearly was not worried by his continued protests. As late as AD 602-3 he made a final appeal to the new patriarch Cyriacus to surrender the “offence of a perverse and proud title”, but the letter is short, and without much of his earlier force.³⁶ However he had not given up, as the early letters to Phocas and his wife Leontia in particular suggest that he was contemplating a renewed approach.³⁷ The matter was finally “settled” after Gregory’s death by Phocas’ imperial edict in 607 which gave Rome the primacy.

With the formal settlement of critical theological issues at Chalcedon in 451, a new benchmark had been set for the definition of orthodoxy concerning the person of Jesus Christ “...in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation...”.³⁸ This council was to prove the basis for a fierce controversy between East and West over the orthodoxy or otherwise of certain theologians either mentioned or alluded to in its proceedings.³⁹ In an attempt to appease the strong monophysite bloc within his empire, which included his wife Theodora, Justinian had made a unilateral declaration in 544 condemning the Three Chapters *viz.* the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrus and Ibas of Edessa, on the basis that they were Nestorian.⁴⁰ After many manoeuvrings Justinian’s condemnations were approved at a general council in Constantinople in 553 and the Three Chapters condemned in the following form; the *person* of Theodore of Mopsuestia, and *selected writings* by Theodoret of Cyrus and Ibas of Edessa.⁴¹ The condemnation was complete after a forced papal approval was wrung from the hapless Vigilius. The monophysites were not conciliated.

Despite strong papal protestations, this decision was strongly opposed by many in the West as a compromise of Chalcedonian orthodoxy, and the resulting furore even saw bishops of Northern Italy break communion with the papacy. Milan remained in schism until 571 though some of the bishops continued to refuse to submit even as late as 594-5⁴² and the schism led by the archbishop of Aquileia lasted for 150 years. The schism had in all probability involved Gregory earlier as Paul the Deacon attributes a letter by Pelagius II to the bishop of Aquileia to his pen. The issue affected his relations with Italian Bishops right from the start,⁴³ and was to stay with Gregory throughout his pontificate.

Gregory’s loyalty to his predecessors and to the emperor required him to continue upholding the decisions of the fifth ecumenical council, though it seems clear that he would rather the whole matter had not occurred. His solution was to do so indirectly, always tying it to full acceptance of all four preceding councils,

³⁶ Ep. XIII.40

³⁷ Ep XIII.31 & 38 to Phocas are simply expressing goodwill and delight at his succession. The letter to Leontia specifically refers to “the church of the blessed apostle Peter which ... has laboured under grievous plots against it” and urges her to “love the church of him to whom it was said, *Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church...etc*” so that her spiritual fate might be secured.

³⁸ Bettensen, H., *Documents of the Christian Church*, Second edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1963 p 51.

³⁹ see Davis, L.D., *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, for detailed accounts of each council.

⁴⁰ See especially Richards, *Popes and Papacy*, pp 142-161.

⁴¹ See the text and comments in “The Fifth Ecumenical Council” *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1983 (repr.) vol XIV *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, pp 297-323. The whole matter seemed to hinge on a careful reading of Chalcedon, and questions such as whether the mere reading of Ibas’ letter also required its implicit approval.

⁴² See Ep IV 39.

⁴³ eg. See a letter to the Bishop of Aquileia from the first Indiction, I.16. and a general letter in his second year II.51.

Chalcedon in particular. In his opening synodical letter to the patriarchs, he reaffirmed his support for the four councils, carefully noting the heresy each was called on to refute.⁴⁴ As councils, they were fundamental “since on them, as on a four square stone rises the structure of the holy faith ... and whosoever ... holds not fast to their solidity ... lies outside the building ...” Yet he also pointedly noted that unlike the fifth, they had been “constituted by universal consent”. This and other careful argument enabled him to “equally venerate” the disputed council, but not in the same foundational way. In Gregory’s logic, the authority of the fifth council was therefore derivative, and he always held to it in terms of the earlier four. “But all persons whom the aforesaid venerable councils repudiate, I repudiate; those whom they venerate I embrace ...” For those who needed to see it, this was a convenient piece of equivocation, as none of Theodore, Theodoret or Ibas had actually been repudiated by Chalcedon, and by their appearance before the Council it might just be possible to conclude that Theodoret and Ibas had been “venerated”. If another argument was needed, there was always the technicality that Constantinople II had not dealt with matters of faith “but only with respect to persons.”⁴⁵

These reservations allowed him the political convenience of omitting any reference to the disputed Constantinopolitan council where necessary for the furtherance of the Catholic Church’s cause. Thus for example, on the advice of the Bishop of Milan he had re-written a letter to Theodelinda, the Catholic wife of Agilulph, king of the Lombards who had earlier expressed her support for the Three Chapters and cut off communion with Rome at a time when every cooperation with the Lombards was vital. The re-write carefully edited out all references to Justinian and to Constantinople II.⁴⁶

Clearly, although Gregory claimed the power to define the true faith on behalf of Peter, it was not a privilege that the remainder of the Church was willing to acknowledge. Large sections of the Western church were unconvinced by his arguments which harmonised the views of Chalcedon and Constantinople II. Some were even prepared to break fellowship with him and bear the title of schismatics. This was an open rejection of any implicit assumptions that they should be totally submissive to the Roman See. In this, supporters of The Three Chapters were not only publicly claiming to be independent of Rome, but that it was Rome which had erred in doctrine.

The controversy over the Three Chapters disrupted the unity of Italy at a time when it could be ill afforded. Justinian’s “liberation” of Italy had exacted a high price, and Italy was in no fit state to enter into another prolonged war against the Lombards.⁴⁷ By the 590’s their incursions had effectively partitioned Italy and resisted various Byzantine induced Frankish invasions designed to dislodge them⁴⁸ The Lombard king Authari controlled the north from their capital at Pavia, while their dukes controlled the extensive southern dukedoms of Spoleto and Benevento.

⁴⁴ Ep I.25 There is particular reference to the condemnation of the “impiety of Nestorius” and the reprobation of the “pravity of Eutyches and Dioscorus”.

⁴⁵ Ep IV.39. as he noted in a letter to the Bishop of Milan.

⁴⁶ Compare the original draft in Ep IV.4 and the final version, Ep IV.38. The Bishop was also commended for unilaterally deciding not to pass on the potentially offending correspondence and advising Gregory of the problem. Ep IV.39.

⁴⁷ Richards, J., *Popes and Papacy*, p 37. Collins, R., *Early Medieval Europe 300-1000*, London, Macmillan, 1991 p 199.

⁴⁸ Collins, R., *Early Medieval Europe*, p 194 ff.

Traditionally considered Arian, their religious history cannot be so easily pigeon-holed⁴⁹

Early in Gregory's pontificate, Rome itself was under pressure from Ariulph, Duke of Spoleto⁵⁰ and there was evidently little help forthcoming from the exarch, that "man [who] ... both evades fighting against our enemies and who forbids our making peace; though even if he wished us to make it we are utterly unable ...".⁵¹ Notwithstanding this prohibition, Gregory evidently concluded a settlement with Ariulph which cost little if anything at all.⁵² Following the exarch's provocation⁵³ Rome was besieged again, this time by the new Lombard king Agilulph, and from its walls Gregory saw "Romans led away with ropes round their necks like dogs to be sold in France".⁵⁴ Eventually a peace was settled, this time at the cost of 500 pounds of gold.⁵⁵ Ever the astute politician, Gregory wrote and personally expressed his appreciation to the king for his desire for peace!⁵⁶ In a separate letter to Theodelinda he praised her for her efforts in the "saving of so much bloodshed on both sides".⁵⁷ In this context his reluctance to offend the Queen over the Three Chapters noted earlier is understandable.

Gregory's initial attempts to settle a peace, while eminently pragmatic under the circumstances, were independent of both emperor and exarch and technically acts of treason. They also provided opportunity for some to denounce him before Maurice as "simple", "without prudence", and deceived by the cunning of Ariulph".⁵⁸ In defence Gregory declared that he had acted for "the advantage of the republic and the cause of the rescue of Italy." and urged the emperor to "believe facts rather than words."⁵⁹ There is no reason to doubt his claim. Gregory had after all been responsible for encouraging opposition to the Lombards while it was possible⁶⁰ suggesting strategies and paying imperial troops out of the Roman Church's resources and organising the continued provision of food and other diaconal aid to the city.⁶¹ He merely did what needed to be done, and what he clearly believed any concerned bishop would have done in his place given the same set of circumstances, even if both the exarch and the bishop of Ravenna were upset or jealous.⁶² As further indication of Gregory's continued loyalty to the emperor we note his comment to Theodelinda urging her to continue urging Agilulph not to "reject the alliance of the Christian Republic" but "betake himself to its friendship."⁶³

Any attempt to interpret Gregory's dealing with the Lombards as an opportunistic advance of Papal power is a gross over reading of the evidence.

⁴⁹ See for example the excellent discussion by Fanning, S.F., "Lombard Arianism Reconsidered" *Speculum*, 56(1981):241-58.

⁵⁰ See Epp II.3,29 & 30.

⁵¹ Ep II.46.

⁵² See his later protestation to Maurice Ep V.40.

⁵³ Gregory complained that the peace was "withdrawn from him". By this time, troops had been removed from Rome for defences elsewhere, leaving the city more vulnerable to renewed attack. See also Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, IV.8.

⁵⁴ Ep V.40.

⁵⁵ Ullmann, *Short History* p 57.

⁵⁶ Ep IX.42.

⁵⁷ Ep IX.43.

⁵⁸ Ep V.40.

⁵⁹ Ep V.40.

⁶⁰ Ep II.30.

⁶¹ Ep V.30.

⁶² See Epp. III.56; 57 (this one is to Gregory from the Bishop of Ravenna) and V.15; VI.34, 61..

⁶³ Ep IX.43.

The Byzantine attempts to use the Franks to halt the Lombard incursions into Italy brought Gregory's dealings with the Frankish Church into prominence. Unlike other barbarian people groups, the Franks had come to Catholic Christianity directly without being caught up in Arianism. But it was a Christianity which while acknowledging its Roman past, had grown up to be somewhat detached from the church in Rome in practice and with a liturgy which was genuinely Frankish, and performed without Roman auspices and without Roman order.⁶⁴ Thus for example, there is nothing "papal" in Gregory of Tours' interest in Rome. It was a place of early martyrdoms (including that of the Blessed Apostle Peter), and suffering,⁶⁵ but the only ongoing religious significance of Rome in the mind of the Gallic church as revealed by Gregory of Tours seemed to be as a destination for pilgrimages to the tombs of the blessed Apostles and as a source of relics.⁶⁶ References to Pelagius II and to the election of Pope Gregory were sufficiently current to be included as simply rounding off his history and have no theological significance.

Towards the end of the sixth century, the Merovingian kingdom was divided between the descendants of Chilperic (d 584) through Clothar II (d 628), and descendants of Sigebert I, (d. 575) first through his son Childebert II, (d 596) and then through his two sons Theudebert (586-612) and Theoderic II (587-613).⁶⁷ Sigebert's wife Brunhild, daughter of the Arian Visigoth Athanagild had renounced her Arianism, and embraced Catholicism.

While Gregory did not enter into the politics of the struggle, it seems evident from the tone and the relative volume of the correspondence that he believed that the true political power (and future) lay with Brunhild.⁶⁸ On every occasion that he wrote to Theudebert and Theoderic⁶⁹ he also wrote her a longer letter covering the same material.⁷⁰ He even acceded to her request that the *pallium* be granted to Syagrius, bishop of Autun, even though this was highly irregular and opened him to possible accusations of inconsistency.⁷¹ In the light of his many concerns for proper ecclesiastical order and correctness in regard to error of the Three Chapters, it is difficult to imagine Gregory agreeing to this request unless he genuinely believed that some overall advantage for the true faith could be secured. However, in view of the "deafening silence" with which his many pleas against simony and the abuses of ordination practices had been received⁷² it is hard to see why he should believe that granting a *pallium* would change matters. But even for popes there were times when

⁶⁴ See here Wallace-Hadrill, J.M., *The Frankish Church*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983, pp 110-122. and Hen, Yitzak, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, 481-751*, Leiden, E.J.Brill, 1995. p 59.

⁶⁵ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, I.24.

⁶⁶ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, IV.6.

⁶⁷ The earlier kingdom of Burgundy, under Guntram (d 593) had been assumed by Childebert II, and subsequently passed to Theoderic II on his death in 596.

⁶⁸ He wrote ten letters to Brunhild, one to Childebert II and at least six to her grandsons, and only one to Clothar. In the end however, it was Clothar who became sole King of the Franks in 613.

⁶⁹ whether jointly: Epp VI.58; IX.106; 110; or separately Epp XI.59, 60, XII.7.

⁷⁰ It is true that she was acting as regent, so in one sense there was nothing strange in that, but on the other hand, as regent she would have read the letters to both Theudebert and Theoderic anyway. In this light the separate letters become significant.

⁷¹ Ep IX.11. Here Gregory explained the delay in granting the *pallium*. Although the Emperor had agreed, Syagrius had unfortunate past associations with heretics (ie with those involved in protest over The Three Chapters) and furthermore he had not even requested it. Since Brunhild's involvement was to be deliberately kept out of the picture, Syagrius would have to be prompted to ask for it and support from his local bishops would have to be arranged. His agent Candidus had the *pallium* and would hand it over once all the details were completed.

⁷² eg see Epp IX.11, 108, 117, XI.6. Even enormous doses of flattery did not work XI.63.

political considerations needed to be subservient to the good of the Church and its benefactors.⁷³

But Gregory had already used his remonstrances against simony as an opportunity to press claims of primacy on the Frankish Church in a more subtle way. He had earlier prepared a series of three letters to Vigilius Bishop of Arles, all bishops in the Frankish Church under Childebert, and to Childerbert himself.⁷⁴ In them he stresses that the gift of the *pallium* to Vigilius was evidence of their dependence on “the vicariate of the Apostolic See” in accordance with “ancient custom”. The letter to the bishops began with a long dissertation on the necessity for hierarchy in the Church culminating under “one president who may be referred to.” This presidency had been granted to Vigilius as “representing the Apostolic See”, and if he was unable to settle matters of the faith in accordance with the “four holy synods” through assemblies of bishops locally, then the matter was to be referred to Rome. The king was encouraged to pursue reform in return for the *pallium* and to do so for the honour of Blessed Peter Prince of the Apostles.

But if the Frankish Church and State were not open to reforms, at least they could be put to good use in support of Gregory’s mission to the English. A Frankish connection already existed in the person of Bertha, wife of the Kentish King Ethelbert, and cousin of both Clothar II and Childerbert II. Whether there is any truth in the account of his concern for Deiran slaves in the markets of Rome or not,⁷⁵ by 595 Gregory was clearly thinking about the spread of Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons. He requested that his agent Candidus consider using some of the proceeds of his Gallic Patrimony for the evangelization of “English boys seventeen or eighteen years of age who may profit by being given to God in monasteries.”⁷⁶ By 596 the first mission was despatched, under the leadership of Augustine, and after a shaky start⁷⁷ they landed at Kent in 597. Nothing further appears in Gregory’s correspondence until the following year by which time he had been advised of 10000 conversions.⁷⁸

The English mission also provided an opportunity for Gregory to explain his understanding of the degree of variety allowable within the Church under the umbrella of the true faith. Along with a request for assistance⁷⁹ Augustine had also sought advice on practices to adopt in the new Church. Gregory’s reply is an example of the “sanctified common sense” he expected Augustine to use.⁸⁰ With regard to liturgy, even of the mass, Augustine was free to select “such things as are pious, religious and right” and “plant them in the minds of the Angli”. If he could find practices not in the Roman liturgy which were more pleasing to Almighty God, then he was free to use them, for “we ought not to love things for places but places for things.”⁸¹

⁷³ Ep. XIII.6, 8, and 9.

⁷⁴ Epp. V.53, 54, and 55.

⁷⁵ Mayr-Harting, H., *The Coming of Christianity to England*, of Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991, notes that in principle such slaves could have been available at that time. Bede however only describes it as a “tradition of our forefathers”. *Ecclesiastical History*, II.1.

⁷⁶ Ep. VI.7

⁷⁷ Augustine had originally turned back at the French coast, but following a stern reminder that it was “better not to have begun ... than to turn back” was sent out again with a large number of commendatory letters eg. Epp VI.54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59.

⁷⁸ Ep. VII.30.

⁷⁹ Ep XI.58, resulting in the sending of Melitus, Laurentius and others.

⁸⁰ Ep XI.64.

⁸¹ For an excellent discussion of this theme in all the writings of Gregory, not just his letters, see Mayvaert, P., “Diversity and Unity: A Gregorian Theme” *Benedict, Gregory and Others*, London,

On matters of Church polity, Gregory initially advised Augustine he would be subject to the Bishop of Arles in recognition of ancient custom, but have local authority over the existing British bishops.⁸² However he seemed to change his mind soon afterwards, and granted the *pallium* for English use and even suggested a possible future structure for the English church.⁸³ Gregory also changed his mind sharply on the best way to pursue conversions.⁸⁴ Initially Ethelbert was urged to “make haste to extend the Christian faith”, “put down the worship of idols [and] overturn the edifices of their temples” in an attempt to “terrify” them as well as influence them by a good example!⁸⁵ Subsequent reflection, possibly in the light of new material, convinced him that a gentler option “proceeding by paces and not by leaps” was more likely to succeed. Instead of force and destruction, old pagan places of worship could remain, provided they were suitably cleansed. Even old sacrificial practices could remain, provided they were refocussed.

Without question Gregory’s missionary activity would later prove to be highly significant in the development of a missionary thrust back into Europe that was particularly loyal to the papacy. But there seems to be little basis for Ullmann’s imaginative thesis whereby the mission to England served as part of a grand plan to build a society outside the sphere of Imperial jurisdiction in some prophetic vision of medieval Europe. Nor is it the key to understanding the debate over the title of Universal Bishop.⁸⁶ While Gregory saw this mission as a means of extending the Church in the name of the Apostle Peter, it was not the only time that he was concerned for the evangelism of others⁸⁷ and there is simply no reference to such an overriding plan in any of his letters. Nor did Gregory see missionary activity as the sole prerogative of the Bishop of Rome. It was a task any bishop could and should do. His responses to the needs of the mission are consistent with his policy of allowing freedom within general fixed parameters of the faith.

If Gregory was intent on building up a new *societas* independent of the empire, it is also remarkable that there was so little correspondence concerning the church in Spain. Gregory’s close friend Leander was there⁸⁸ and following the conversion of Recared and the adoption of Catholicism by the Council of Toledo in 589 the Church was now free from Arian heresy. Gregory did not write to Recared until 598-9, some ten years after his conversion.⁸⁹ Both Collins and Hanlon suggest

Variorum Reprints, 1977, pp VI 141-162. However Gregory objected strongly to the suggestion that Rome had borrowed some liturgical traditions from Constantinople! See Ep. IX.12.

⁸² If the letter from Columbanus to Gregory is genuine (Ep. IX 127) is genuine, then it is obvious that Gregory would have been aware of some of the key practical differences existing between the Roman and the Celtic Churches. Perhaps this explains in part the reference to teaching the unlearned, strengthening the weak by persuasion and correcting the perverse by authority. Ep. XI.64.

⁸³ XI.65.

⁸⁴ Markus, R.A., “Gregory the Great and a Papal Missionary Structure”, *From Augustine to Gregory*, London, Variorum Reprints, 1983. pp XI.32-36. provides a good background discussion to these two letters and possible reasons for the change of opinion.

⁸⁵ Ep. XI.66.

⁸⁶ Ullmann, W., *The Growth of Papal Government in the Early Middle Ages*, pp 36-39. Furthermore, if there was a “grand plan” it would be unlikely that Gregory would have been so eager to share in its successes with the Emperor. Ep. XI.29.

⁸⁷ eg right at the commencement of his pontificate he was concerned for evangelistic and apologetic preaching in an attempt to convert Lombards, (I.17), and showed interest in encouraging the conversion of Jews.

⁸⁸ There are three letters to Leander, (Ep I.43 V.49 and IX.121) mostly personal in nature, though the first does also deal with recommended procedures in baptism.

⁸⁹ Ep IX.122. From Gregory’s reply, we learn that there had been some attempt at official contact. One embassy had been turned back by the sea, (though Gregory eventually received it), and Recared had also made some representations through “a certain Neapolitan youth”.

that this delay was political, reflecting either the years of hostility between the Visigoths and the empire, or new Spanish notions of theocratic government and that Gregory, true patriot that he was, was reluctant to become involved or be seen to offering support.⁹⁰

But all this is hardly sufficient to explain the lack of correspondence from Gregory to either a Catholic monarch or a Catholic church within his sphere of influence. After all, one would expect that in emerging from troubled years of Arian domination, there would be all sorts of issues to be addressed as exemplified by the letter from Bishop Licinianus.⁹¹ Surprisingly no answer seems to have been forthcoming.

There was however, one local matter on which Gregory's opinion was sought - that of correct baptismal practice. In Spain, the Roman practice of triple immersion in honour of the Trinity could be misinterpreted as an Arian practice. Gregory's response again reflected his "common sense" approach. Since there was one true faith, there could quite easily be a variation in practice, especially where that variation was necessary to preserve the faith, and could itself be made to illustrate a truth.⁹² This advice is in marked contrast to the accommodation later allowed to the English Church. The reason probably lies in the fact that the English were pagans, whereas the Arians were heretics.

One thing however is clear; Gregory did not seek either personal or official influence in Spain. Nor is there any evidence that suggests he would have been readily granted it if he had.

As Bishop of Rome, Gregory had the same disciplinary prerogatives as any bishop, to which could be added the responsibilities attending to a large Patriarchal See. The letters provide many examples of rebuke, review and advice designed to forestall potential problems in the affairs of regional dioceses. But there is nothing really remarkable in that. The only real opportunity to examine a "papal" concept of discipline at work is in observing how Gregory exercised discipline over those who were otherwise beyond the reach of "ordinary" discipline, and over those who were his professed equals or betters.

In all dealings with the Emperor, Gregory maintained the utmost respect. He was a subject addressing his "God-appointed Lord"⁹³ This was true even of Phocas. The Emperor also had ecclesiastical functions which Gregory accepted, such as the right to appoint the Patriarch of Constantinople⁹⁴ and to approve the granting of *pallia*.⁹⁵ Apart from the special case associated with the Lombards (which was effectively forced upon him), Gregory's political involvement was limited. He drew

⁹⁰ Collins, R., *Early Medieval Spain*, London, Macmillan, 1983 p 44 ff. Hanlon, C.P., *Dreams and Realities*, p 160. The question must remain open, though it is interesting to note that Recared was seeking copies of old Justinian treaties with Spain which may well have had current political implications.

⁹¹ Ep. II.54. Licinianus requested a copy of the Pastoral Rule, and asked what qualifications other than knowing Jesus Christ and Him crucified faith might suffice for a bishop! Interestingly, Licinianus' letter does not ask for material because Gregory was pope, but because it had proved useful.

⁹² Ep. I.53.

⁹³ Ep. V.20 Ullmann *Short History*, p 37, noted that in correspondence the Emperor was nearly always his master (*dominus*) whereas the western rulers were his sons (*fili*) and implied motives of Western superiority on Gregory's part. But there need be nothing implicit in that other than Gregory's continued respectful acknowledgment of the Emperor's position.

⁹⁴ Ep. VII.6.

⁹⁵ Thus even Brunhild's political request on behalf of Syagrius needed Maurice's approval.

no delight in having to act the part of an “earthly noble”⁹⁶ Even when he believed the Emperor had overstepped the mark, he was discreet and concerned for the imperial dignity.⁹⁷

But Gregory did believe that popes also possessed the power to annul the proceedings of synods, as Pelagius II had done over John’s use of the “proud and pestiferous” title of Universal Bishop, and it was the “authority and consent of the Apostolic See” which made a synod lawful.⁹⁸ Popes could also remove *pallia* as a disciplinary measure if the need arose.⁹⁹ Gregory saw it as his legitimate business to raise the matter of simony in the Sees of Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem and call for reform.¹⁰⁰ But his disciplinary privileges also extended to intervening directly as in the cases of John the presbyter and Athanasius of Isauria both accused of heresy but subsequently exonerated on his own authority.¹⁰¹

As occupier of the Roman See, Gregory held no ordinary church office. Like his recent predecessors, he believed he stood in direct line from Blessed Peter, Prince of the Apostles himself, with all the privileges and responsibilities that came with that honour. It was his divinely appointed task to guard the substance of the Christian faith, which had been sufficiently defined by the four ecumenical councils, culminating in the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. What Peter had previously approved (even if through Vigilius) must be maintained. To this end he possessed the right to see that in the outworking of the faith, it was not compromised by heresy, error, injustice ignorance, or pride. That right extended over his fellow patriarchs, (who in every other respect could be his equals), over kings and even over Emperors. But the both the Church and the Empire had their legitimate officers, who, provided that they kept to the bounds of true doctrine and a sanctified life, could be expected to exercise reasonable liberty in determining how best to bring Glory to God in their particular sphere. Leander and Augustine might ask for advice, but they were also free, as was Maurice. Gregory’s primacy was one of doctrine and discipline rather than one of order and Roman uniformity.

But this primacy was not universally accepted or understood, and had to be explained. The title was offered to Peter as his by right, but he had refused it. This explains the evident tension in so many of Gregory’s letters and the indirect manner of his arguments. He must proclaim primacy without grasping it. His solution was to show it, primarily but not exclusively so, through the humble exercise of office and by the power of example. It was by definition a primacy tied to the office he held. Equally by definition, it was utterly impossible for others to aspire to that primacy while holding any other office without breaking its fundamental characteristics. The Petrine primacy was one to be given, not claimed, for to claim it was to fall into “the error of pride”.¹⁰² Both the patriarchs John and Cyriacus were therefore usurpers and

⁹⁶ Ep. I.25. Whereas triple immersion reflected the triuneness of God in the one rite, so a single immersion reflected the inherent unity of the godhead.

⁹⁷ as when Maurice banned all soldiers from becoming monks in an endeavour to stop some from doing so to escape their debts. Gregory forwarded his protest privately via the court physician. The Emperor was happy to compromise. See Epp VII.66 & VIII.5.

⁹⁸ Ep. IX.68. Thus while discretely absolving the Emperor from any accusation of impropriety, he saw fit to warn the bishops of Thessalonica, *et al* against being trapped by Constantinopolitan cunning into somehow giving credence to the title of Universal Bishop. They were not even to use the words!

⁹⁹ Ep. II.19.

¹⁰⁰ eg. see Epp. IX.49 (Antioch); X.46 (Jerusalem); XIII.41 (Alexandria).

¹⁰¹ See Epp. VI.14,15,16,17. The dismissive language used of Constantinopolitan justice is illuminating.

¹⁰² Ep VII.33.

as such also destroyed the integrity of the office they possessed, and the honour of the Church.

Titles expressing the function of office can go one of two ways. Either they can become formulaic and empty, or their holders can outgrow or conveniently overlook the implicit assumptions of the day which held them in check. As a self titled “Servant of the servants of God”, Gregory sought to avoid either extreme through the checks and balances of honest self examination. It is not hard to see how loosed from such constraints, his idea of Primacy could indeed become an excuse for a Primacy from which the idea of Service was totally lacking. But it did not have to be that way.

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