



Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

THE PRIMACY OF THE SUCCESSOR OF PETER IN THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH

1. At this moment in the Church's life, the question of the primacy of Peter and of his Successors has exceptional importance as well as ecumenical significance. John Paul II has frequently spoken of this, particularly in the Encyclical *Ut unum sint*, in which he extended an invitation especially to pastors and theologians to "find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation".¹

In answer to the Holy Father's invitation, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith decided to study the matter by organizing a strictly doctrinal symposium on *The Primacy of the Successor of Peter*, which was held in the Vatican from 2 to 4 December 1996. Its Proceedings have recently been published.²

2. In his Message to those attending the symposium, the Holy Father wrote: "The Catholic Church is conscious of having preserved, in fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition and the faith of the Fathers, the ministry of the Successor of Peter".³ In the history of the Church, there is a continuity of doctrinal development on the primacy. In preparing the present text, which appears in the Appendix of the above-mentioned Proceedings,⁴ the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has used the contributions of the scholars who took part in the symposium, but without intending to offer a synthesis of them or to go into questions requiring further study. These "Reflections" - appended to the symposium - are meant only to recall the *essential* points of Catholic doctrine on the primacy, Christ's great gift to his Church because it is a necessary service to unity and, as history shows, it has often defended the freedom of Bishops and the particular Churches against the interference of political authorities.

I. Origin, Purpose and Nature of the Primacy

3. "First Simon, who is called Peter".⁵ With this significant emphasis on the primacy of Simon Peter, St Matthew inserts in his Gospel the list of the Twelve Apostles, which also begins with the name of Simon in the other two synoptic Gospels and in Acts.⁶ This list, which has great evidential force, and other Gospel passages⁷ show clearly and simply that the New Testament canon received what Christ said about Peter and his role in the group of the Twelve.⁸ Thus, in the early Christian communities, as later throughout the Church, the image of Peter remained fixed as that of the Apostle who, despite his human weakness, was expressly assigned by Christ to the first place among the Twelve and was called to exercise a distinctive, specific task in the Church. He is *the rock* on which Christ will build his Church;⁹ he is the one, after he has been converted, whose faith will not fail and who will strengthen his brethren;¹⁰ lastly, he is the Shepherd who will lead the whole community of the Lord's disciples.¹¹

In Peter's person, mission and ministry, in his presence and death in Rome attested by the most ancient literary and archaeological tradition - the Church sees a deeper reality

essentially related to her own mystery of communion and salvation: "*Ubi Petrus, ibi ergo Ecclesia*".¹² From the beginning and with increasing clarity, the Church has understood that, just as there is a succession of the Apostles in the ministry of Bishops, so too the ministry of unity entrusted to Peter belongs to the permanent structure of Christ's Church and that this succession is established in the see of his martyrdom.

4. On the basis of the New Testament witness, the Catholic Church teaches, as a doctrine of faith, that the Bishop of Rome is the Successor of Peter in his primatial service in the universal Church;¹³ this succession explains the preeminence of the Church of Rome,¹⁴ enriched also by the preaching and martyrdom of St Paul.

In the divine plan for the primacy as "the office that was given individually by the Lord to Peter, the first of the Apostles, and to be handed on to his successors",¹⁵ we already see the purpose of the Petrine charism, i.e., "the unity of faith and communion"¹⁶ of all believers. The Roman Pontiff, as the Successor of Peter, is "the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity both of the Bishops and of the multitude of the faithful"¹⁷ and therefore he has a specific ministerial grace for serving that unity of faith and communion which is necessary for the Church to fulfil her saving mission.¹⁸

5. The Constitution *Pastor aeternus* of the First Vatican Council indicated the purpose of the Primacy in its Prologue and then dedicated the body of the text to explaining the content or scope of its power. The Second Vatican Council, in turn, reaffirmed and completed the teaching of Vatican I,¹⁹ addressing primarily the theme of its purpose, with particular attention to the mystery of the Church as *Corpus Ecclesiarum*.²⁰ This consideration allowed for a clearer exposition of how the primatial office of the Bishop of Rome and the office of the other Bishops are not in opposition but in fundamental and essential harmony.²¹

Therefore, "when the Catholic Church affirms that the office of the Bishop of Rome corresponds to the will of Christ, she does not separate this office from the mission entrusted to the whole body of Bishops, who are also 'vicars and ambassadors of Christ' (*Lumen gentium*, n. 27). The Bishop of Rome is a member of the 'College', and the Bishops are his brothers in the ministry".²² It should also be said, reciprocally, that episcopal collegiality does not stand in opposition to the personal exercise of the primacy nor should it relativize it.

6. All the Bishops are subjects of the *sollicitudo omnium Ecclesiarum*²³ as members of the Episcopal College which has succeeded to the College of the Apostles, to which the extraordinary figure of St Paul also belonged. This universal dimension of their *episkope* (overseeing) cannot be separated from the particular dimension of the offices entrusted to them.²⁴ In the case of the Bishop of Rome - Vicar of Christ in the way proper to Peter as Head of the College of Bishops²⁵ - the *sollicitudo omnium Ecclesiarum* acquires particular force because it is combined with the *full and supreme power* in the Church:²⁶ a truly episcopal power, not only supreme, full and universal, but also immediate, over all pastors and other faithful.²⁷ The ministry of Peter's Successor, therefore, is not a service that reaches each Church from outside, but is inscribed in the heart of each particular Church, in which "the Church of Christ is truly present and active",²⁸ and for this reason it includes openness to the ministry of unity. This interiority of the Bishop of Rome's ministry to each particular Church is also an expression of the *mutual interiority* between universal Church and particular Church.²⁹

The episcopacy and the primacy, reciprocally related and inseparable, are of divine institution. Historically there arose forms of ecclesiastical organization instituted by the Church in which a primatial principle was also practised. In particular, the Catholic Church is

well aware of the role of the apostolic sees in the early Church, especially those considered Petrine - Antioch and Alexandria - as reference-points of the Apostolic Tradition, and around which the patriarchal system developed; this system is one of the ways God's Providence guides the Church and from the beginning it has included a relation to the Petrine tradition.³⁰

II. The Exercise of the Primacy and Its Forms

7. The exercise of the Petrine ministry must be understood - so that it "may lose nothing of its authenticity and transparency"³¹ - on the basis of the Gospel, that is, on its essential place in the saving mystery of Christ and the building-up of the Church. The primacy differs in its essence and in its exercise from the offices of governance found in human societies:³² it is not an office of co-ordination or management, nor can it be reduced to a *primacy of honour*, or be conceived as a political monarchy.

The Roman Pontiff - like all the faithful - is subject to the Word of God, to the Catholic faith, and is the guarantor of the Church's obedience; in this sense he is *servus servorum Dei*. He does not make arbitrary decisions, but is spokesman for the will of the Lord, who speaks to man in the Scriptures lived and interpreted by Tradition; in other words, the *episkope* of the primacy has limits set by divine law and by the Church's divine, inviolable constitution found in Revelation.³³ The Successor of Peter is the rock which guarantees a rigorous fidelity to the Word of God against arbitrariness and conformism: hence the martyrological nature of his primacy.

8. The characteristics of exercising the primacy must be understood primarily on the basis of two fundamental premises: *the unity of the episcopacy and the episcopal nature of the primacy* itself. Since the episcopacy is "one and undivided"³⁴ the primacy of the Pope implies the authority effectively to serve the unity of all the Bishops and all the faithful, and "is exercised on various levels, including vigilance over the handing down of the Word, the celebration of the liturgy and the sacraments, the Church's mission, discipline and the Christian life";³⁵ on these levels, by the will of Christ, everyone in the Church - Bishops and the other faithful - owe obedience to the Successor of Peter, who is also the guarantor of the legitimate diversity of rites, disciplines and ecclesiastical structures between East and West.

9. Given its episcopal nature, the primacy of the Bishop of Rome is first of all expressed in transmitting the Word of God; thus it includes a specific, particular responsibility for the mission of evangelization,³⁶ since ecclesial communion is something essentially meant to be expanded: "Evangelization is the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity".³⁷

The Roman Pontiff's episcopal responsibility for transmission of the Word of God also extends within the whole Church. As such, it is a supreme and universal *magisterial office*;³⁸ it is an office that involves a charism: the Holy Spirit's special assistance to the Successor of Peter, which also involves, in certain cases, the prerogative of infallibility.³⁹ Just as "all the Churches are in full and visible communion, because all the Pastors are in communion with Peter and therefore united in Christ",⁴⁰ in the same way the Bishops are witnesses of divine and Catholic truth when they teach in communion with the Roman Pontiff.⁴¹

10. Together with the magisterial role of the primacy, the mission of Peter's Successor for the whole Church entails the right to perform acts of ecclesiastical governance necessary or suited to promoting and defending the unity of faith and communion; one of these, for example, is to give the mandate for the ordination of new Bishops, requiring that they make the profession of Catholic faith; to help everyone continue in the faith professed. Obviously, there are many other possible ways, more or less contingent, of carrying out this service of

unity: to issue laws for the whole Church, to establish pastoral structures to serve various particular Churches, to give binding force to the decisions of Particular Councils, to approve supradiocesan religious institutes, etc. Since the power of the primacy is supreme, there is no other authority to which the Roman Pontiff must juridically answer for his exercise of the gift he has received: "*prima sedes a nemine iudicatur*".⁴² This does not mean, however, that the Pope has absolute power. listening to what the Churches are saying is, in fact, an earmark of the ministry of unity, a consequence also of the unity of the Episcopal Body and of the *sensus fidei* of the entire People of God; and this bond seems to enjoy considerably greater power and certainty than the juridical authorities - an inadmissible hypothesis, moreover, because it is groundless - to which the Roman Pontiff would supposedly have to answer. The ultimate and absolute responsibility of the Pope is best guaranteed, on the one hand, by its relationship to Tradition and fraternal communion and, on the other, by trust in the assistance of the Holy Spirit who governs the Church.

11. The unity of the Church, which the ministry of Peter's Successor serves in a unique way, reaches its highest expression in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, which is the centre and root of ecclesial communion; this communion is also necessarily based on the unity of the Episcopate. Therefore, "every celebration of the Eucharist is performed in union not only with the proper Bishop, but also with the Pope, with the episcopal order, with all the clergy, and with the entire people. Every valid celebration of the Eucharist expresses this universal communion *with Peter* and with the whole Church, or *objectively* calls for it",⁴³ as in the case of the Churches which are not in full communion with the Apostolic See.

12. "The pilgrim Church, in its sacraments and institutions, which belong to this age, carries the mark of this world which is passing".⁴⁴ For this reason too, the immutable nature of the primacy of Peter's Successor has historically been expressed in different forms of exercise appropriate to the situation of a pilgrim Church in this changing world.

The concrete contents of its exercise distinguish the Petrine ministry insofar as they faithfully express the application of its ultimate purpose (the unity of the Church) to the circumstances of time and place. The greater or lesser extent of these concrete contents will depend in every age on the *necessitas Ecclesiae*. The Holy Spirit helps the Church to recognize this *necessity*, and the Roman Pontiff, by listening to the Spirit's voice in the Churches, looks for the answer and offers it when and how he considers it appropriate.

Consequently, the nucleus of the doctrine of faith concerning the competencies of the primacy cannot be determined by looking for the least number of functions exercised historically. Therefore, the fact that a particular task has been carried out by the primacy in a certain era does not mean *by itself* that this task should necessarily be reserved always to the Roman Pontiff, and, vice versa, the *mere* fact that a particular role was not previously exercised by the Pope does not warrant the conclusion that this role could not in some way be exercised in the future as a competence of the primacy.

13. In any case, it is essential to state that discerning whether the possible ways of exercising the Petrine ministry correspond to its nature is a discernment to be made *in Ecclesia*, i.e., with the assistance of the Holy Spirit and in fraternal dialogue between the Roman Pontiff and the other Bishops, according to the Church's concrete needs. But, at the same time, it is clear that only the Pope (or the Pope with an Ecumenical Council) has, as the Successor of Peter, the authority and the competence to say the last word on the ways to exercise his pastoral ministry in the universal Church.

14. In recalling these essential points of Catholic doctrine on the primacy of Peter's Successor, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is certain that the authoritative reaffirmation of these doctrinal achievements offers greater clarity on the way to be

followed. This reminder is also useful for avoiding the continual possibility of relapsing into biased and one-sided positions already rejected by the Church in the past (Febronianism, Gallicanism, ultramontanism, conciliarism, etc.). Above all, by seeing the ministry of the *Servant of the servants of God* as a great gift of divine mercy to the Church, we will all find with the grace of the Holy Spirit - the energy to live and faithfully maintain full and real union with the Roman Pontiff in the everyday life of the Church, in the way desired by Christ.⁴⁵

15. The full communion which the Lord desires among those who profess themselves his disciples calls for the common recognition of a universal ecclesial ministry "in which all the Bishops recognize that they are united in Christ and all the faithful find confirmation for their faith".⁴⁶ The Catholic Church professes that this ministry is the primatial ministry of the Roman Pontiff, Successor of Peter, and maintains humbly and firmly "that the communion of the particular Churches with the Church of Rome, and of their Bishops with the Bishop of Rome, is -- in God's plan -- an essential requisite of full and visible communion".⁴⁷ Human errors and even serious failings can be found in the history of the papacy: Peter himself acknowledged he was a sinner.⁴⁸ Peter, a weak man, was chosen as the rock precisely so that everyone could see that victory belongs to Christ alone and is not the result of human efforts. Down the ages the Lord has wished to put his treasure in fragile vessels:⁴⁹ human frailty has thus become a sign of the truth of God's promises.

When and how will the much-desired goal of the unity of all Christians be reached? "How to obtain it? Through *hope* in the Spirit, who can banish from us the painful memories of our separation. The Spirit is able to grant us clear-sightedness, strength, and courage to take whatever steps are necessary, that our commitment may be ever more authentic".⁵⁰ We are all invited to trust in the Holy Spirit, to trust in Christ, by trusting in Peter.

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1. John Paul II, Encyc. Let. *Ut unum sint*, 25 May 1995, n. 95.

2. *Il Primato del Successore di Pietro*, Atti del Simposio teologico, Rome, 2-4 December 1996, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 1998.

3. John Paul II, *Letter* to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in *ibid.*, p. 20.

4. *Il Primato del Successore di Pietro nel mistero della Chiesa*, Considerazioni della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede, in *ibid.*, Appendix, pp. 493-503. The text was also published as a booklet by the Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

5. Mt 10:2.

6. Cf. Mk 3:16; Lk 6:14; Acts 1: 13.

7. Cf. Mt 14:28-31; 16:16-23 and par.; 19:27-29 and par.; 26:33-35 and par.; Lk 22:32; Jn 1:42; 6:67-70; 13:36-38; 21:15-19.

8. Evidence for the Petrine ministry is found in all the expressions, however different, of the New Testament tradition, both in the Synoptics - here with different features in Matthew and

Luke, as well as in St Mark - and in the Pauline corpus and the Johannine tradition, always with original elements, differing in their narrative aspects but in profound agreement about their essential meaning. This is a sign that the Petrine reality was regarded as a constitutive given of the Church.

9. Cf. Mt 16:18.

10. Cf. Lk 22:32.

11. Cf. Jn 21:15-17. Regarding the New Testament evidence on the primacy, cf. also John Paul II, Encyc. Let. *Ut unum sint*, nn. 90ff.

12. St Ambrose of Milan, *Enarr. in Ps.*, 40, 30: *PL* 14, 1134.

13. Cf. for example St Siricius I, Let. *Directa ad decessorem*, 10 February 385: Denz-Hun, n. 181; Second Council of Lyons, *Professio fidei* of Michael Palaeologus, 6 July 1274: Denz-Hun, n. 861; Clement VI, Let. *Super quibusdam*, 29 November 1351: Denz-Hun, n. 1053; Council of Florence, Bull *Laetentur caeli*, 6 July 1439: Denz-Hun, n. 1307; Pius IX, Encyc. Let. *Qui pluribus*, 9 November 1846: Denz-Hun, n. 2781; First Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Pastor aeternus*, Chap. 2: Denz-Hun, nn. 3056-3058; Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, Chap. 111, nn. 21-23; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 882; etc.

14. Cf. St Ignatius of Antioch, *Epist. ad Romanos*, Introd.: *SChr* 10, 106-107; St Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 3, 2: *SChr* 211, 32-33.

15. Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, n. 20.

16. First Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Pastor aeternus*, Prologue: Denz-Hun, n. 3051. Cf. St Leo I the Great, *Tract. in Natale eiusdem*, IV, 2: CCL 138, p. 19.

17. Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, n. 23. Cf. First Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Pastor aeternus*, Prologue: Denz-Hun, n. 3051; John Paul II, Encyc. Let. *Ut unum sint*, n. 88. Cf. Pius IX, Letter of the Holy Office to the Bishops of England, 16 November 1864: Denz-Hun, n. 2888; Leo XIII, Encyc. Let. *Satis cognitum*, 29 June 1896: Denz-Hun, nn. 3305-3310.

18. Cf. Jn 17:21-23; Second Vatican Council, Decr. *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 1; Paul VI, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 8 December 1975, n. 77: AAS 68 (1976) 69; John Paul II, Encyc. Let. *Ut unum sint*, n. 98.

19. Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, n. 18.

20. Cf. *ibid.*, n. 23.

21. Cf. First Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Pastor aeternus*, Chap. 3: Denz-Hun, n. 3061; cf. *Joint Declaration of the German Bishops*, Jan.-Feb. 1875: Denz-Hun, nn. 3112-3113; Leo XIII, Encyc. Let. *Satis cognitum*, 29 June 1896: Denz-Hun, n. 3310; Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, n. 27. As Pius IX explained in his *Address* after the promulgation of the Constitution *Pastor aeternus*: "Summa ista Romani Pontificis auctoritas, Venerabiles Fratres, non opprimit sed adiuvat, non destruit sed aedificat, et saepissime confirmat in dignitate, unit in caritate, et Fratrum, scificet Episcoporum, iura firmat atque tuetur" (Mansi 52, 1336 A/B).

22. John Paul II, Encyc. Let. *Ut unum sint*, n. 95.

23. Cor 11:28.

24. The ontological priority that the universal Church has, in her essential mystery, over every individual particular Church (cf Congr. for the Doctrine of the Faith, Let. *Communio notio*, 28 May 1992, n. 9) also emphasizes the importance of the universal dimension of every Bishop's ministry.

25. Bull Cf. First Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Pastor aeternus*, Chap. 3: Denz-Hun, n. 3059; Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, n. 22; cf. Council of Florence, Bull *Laetentur caeli*, 6 July 1439: Denz-Hun, n. 1307.

26. Cf. First Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Pastor aeternus*, Chap. 3: Denz-Hun, nn. 3060, 3064.

27. Cf. *ibid.*; Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, n. 22.

28. Second Vatican Council, Decr. *Christus Dominus*, n. 11.

29. Cf. Congr. for the Doctrine of the Faith, Let. *Communio notio*, n. 13.

30. Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, n. 23; Decr. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, nn. 7 and 9.

31. John Paul II, Encyc. Let. *Ut unum sint*, n. 93.

32. Cf. *ibid.*, n. 94.

33. Cf. *Joint Declaration of the German Bishops*, Jan.-Feb. 1875: Denz-Hun, n. 3114.

34. First Vatican Council, Const. Dogm. *Pastor aeternus*, Prologue: Denz.-Hun, n. 3051.

35. John Paul II, Encyc. Let. *Ut unum sint*, n. 94.

36. Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, n. 23; Leo XIII, Encyc. Let. *Grande munus*, 30 November 1880: ASS 13 (1880) 145; *CIC*, can. 782, §1.

37. Paul VI, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 14. Cf. *CIC*, can. 781.

38. Cf. First Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Pastor aeternus*, Chap. 4: Denz-Hun, nn. 3065-3068.

39. Cf. *ibid.*: Denz-Hun, 3073-3074; Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, n. 25; *CIC*, can. 749, §1; *CCEO*, can. 597, §1.

40. John Paul II, Encyc. Let. *Ut unum sint*, n. 94.

41. Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, n. 25.

42. *CIC*, can. 1404; *CCEO*, can. 1058. Cf. First Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Pastor aeternus*, Chap. 3: Denz-Hun, n. 3063.

43. Congr. for the Doctrine of the Faith, Let. *Communio notio*, n. 14. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1369.

44. Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, n. 48.

45. Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const., *Lumen gentium*, n. 15.

46. John Paul II, Encyc. Let. *Ut unum sint*, n. 97.

47. Ibid.

48. Cf. Lk 5:8.

49. Cf. 2 Cor 4:7.

50. John Paul II, Encyc. Let. *Ut unum sint*, n. 102.

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