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WE HAVE A POPE!

HABEMUS PAPAM!

THE PAPAL OFFICE THROUGH HIS TITLES AND SYMBOLS

‘Gaudium Magnum: Habemus Papam!’ These famous words introduce a new Pope to the world. They are spoken to the throng that gathers in St. Peter’s Square to celebrate the occasion. The Pope is one of the last examples of absolute sovereignty in the modern world and embodies one of history’s oldest institutions. The executive, legislative, and juridical powers are all concentrated in the Papal office. Until the Pope dies or resigns, he remains the Pope with all his titles and privileges. The only restriction on



his power is that he cannot choose his own successor. In other words, the papacy is not dynastic. This task belongs to the College of electing Cardinals, that is, cardinals under eighty years old. They gather to elect a new Pope in the 'Conclave' (from the Latin *cum clave*, i.e. locked up with a key), located in the Sistine Chapel. If the Pope cannot choose his own successor he can, nonetheless, choose those who elect.

A good starting point for investigating the significance of the Papacy is the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It is the most recent and comprehensive account of the Roman Catholic faith. Referring to the office of the Pope, the *Catechism* notes in paragraph 882 that 'the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.'³ This brief sentence contains an apt summary of what the history and office of the papacy are all about. The Pope is a contemporary religious leader who boasts of direct and unbroken lineage to the Apostle Peter. The Pope, by means of succession, claims to continue the mission entrusted to Peter.

Further reinforcing his power and authority, paragraph 937 of the *Catechism* states: 'The Pope enjoys, by divine institution, supreme, full, immediate, and universal power in the care of souls.' The Papacy is presented as a divinely



The use of the words *Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum: habemus papam*, Latin words meaning: 'We announce with great joy, we have a new Pope' goes back to the days of the election of Martin V in 1417 when three popes claimed the See of Peter. This announcement was given with a sense of relief.

appointed institution that presides over the life of the Church and exercises its rule over God's flock.

Many colourful tourist guides are available to visitors at the Vatican. They highlight all the interesting things that a normal tourist would like to know while walking around the centre of the Roman Catholic Church. But if you really want to know who's who in the Vatican you should get hold of a thick tome: the Pontifical Yearbook. This massive volume of more than 2350 pages contains all sorts of information about everything related to the Vatican and what happens there. Published and updated every year, it faithfully records all events and changes of the previous year. The Pontifical Yearbook is another useful resource for unpacking the theological and institutional significance of the papacy. One particular section lists the official titles of the Pope:

- 'Bishop of Rome'
- 'Vicar of Jesus Christ'
- 'Successor of the prince of the Apostles' (i.e. Peter)
- 'Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church'
- 'Primate of Italy' and 'Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province'
- 'Sovereign of the State of the Vatican City'
- 'Servant of God's servants'.

This list of Papal titles is astonishing and covers various religious offices, political tasks and organizational responsibilities. Each title provides a different perspective on the Papal office, and taken as a whole they help one appreciate who the Pope is and what he does.

BISHOP OF ROME

Another magisterial document that addresses the Pope as Bishop of Rome suggests the following: "The Shepherd of the Lord's whole flock is the Bishop of the Church of Rome, where the Blessed Apostle Peter, by sovereign disposition of divine Providence, offered to Christ the supreme witness of martyrdom by the shedding of his blood."⁴ The chain of thought that supports such a statement is the following:

- The apostle Peter was the first Bishop of Rome and was martyred there;
- the Shepherd of the Church of Rome presides over the 'whole flock';
- Peter's successors as bishops of Rome are given the same task of shepherding the universal church.

The Pope is the Bishop of Rome in succession to Peter, who is considered the first Bishop and the prototype for all bishops. As Bishop of Rome, he is Pope over the whole church. We will see how this account of Peter and his ministry developed, and how the succession paradigm became the rule for the Roman Catholic Church.

VICAR OF JESUS CHRIST

This title has an important Christological thrust and has been used since the fifth century, although it was in the Middle Ages that it gained wide acceptance over the more

The doctrine of the Threefold Office of Christ (*Triplex munus Christi*)—Jesus Christ being king, prophet and priest—was fully developed by John Calvin. Was it ever meant to apply to a single person in church office? 

realistic ‘Vicar of Peter’. The Pope is not only the Bishop of Rome (an ecclesiastical claim), but also the one who has represented Christ at the highest human level since His ascension (a Christological claim). The thinking is that the post-resurrection ministry of Jesus Christ needs a human vicar who acts on His behalf until His second coming. In the Roman Catholic understanding all priests act *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ), but the reference to the Vicar of Christ certainly amplifies its meaning. This title warrants the Papal claims of being a supreme ruler (as Jesus is King), an infallible teacher when he speaks *ex-cathedra* (‘from the seat’ as Jesus is Prophet), and a high priest in an hierarchical structure (as Jesus is Priest). It therefore tends to blur and confuse what needs to be distinguished, and has been a source of on-going debate within Christianity over the centuries. According to Protestantism, Christ alone (*Solus Christus*) is King, Prophet and Priest in a unique sense. His ministry is a trinitarian work that the Holy Spirit carries out, thus excluding the need for a human ‘vicar’.

SUCCESSOR OF THE PRINCE OF THE APOSTLES

This monarchical title needs unpacking to understand what is at stake here. There are two main points: one

is the reference to the succession of Peter's office by another bishop, and the other is the attribution to the Apostle Peter of a 'regal' role among the other apostles. The whole structure of the Papacy rests on the idea that Peter ordained his successor as Bishop of Rome, and the pattern of succession continued throughout the centuries. The successors were therefore considered to be in apostolic continuity with the former Bishops of Rome. Here is how the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) puts it: God 'placed blessed Peter over the other apostles, and instituted in him a permanent and visible source and foundation of unity of faith and fellowship.'⁵ This 'unbroken' continuity is important for the hierarchical constitution and sacramental structure of the Church of Rome. It is a major argument that Roman Catholics use to distinguish their Church from other Churches (e.g. Protestant and Anglican Churches) which have broken the apostolic chain by separating themselves from Rome.



Protestants also have a concept of unbroken continuity, but it refers to faithfulness to the 'apostolic teaching' of the Church rather than the transmission of the hierarchical outlook of the Church.

SUPREME PONTIFF OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

This title underlines the strong influence of the Roman Imperial structure and offices on the institution of the Papacy. The term pontiff is derived from the Latin word *pontifex*, literally 'bridge builder' (*pons* + *facere*), and indicated a member of the principal college of priests

in ancient Rome. The head of the college was known as the *Pontifex Maximus* (the greatest pontiff). Popes have always viewed themselves as the new Pontiff and successor to the Roman imperial structure. In a spiritual sense, the Pope is a bridge builder between God and man and between man and man. *Pontifex Maximum* is seen everywhere in Rome and on Papal buildings and properties in its acronym form (P.M.) as a Papal signature on palaces and monuments. Since the fifteenth century, Popes have liked to refer to themselves using this title, which is still widely used.

PRIMATE OF ITALY AND ARCHBISHOP AND METROPOLITAN OF THE ROMAN PROVINCE

These two titles have an ecclesiastical bearing and a territorial connotation. A Primate is a bishop of the highest rank in a province or country, so the Pope is the primate of Italy and the whole world. Archbishop and Metropolitan are almost synonymous titles and refer to the concrete and territorial role of the Pope as the head of the Church.

SOVEREIGN OF THE STATE OF THE VATICAN CITY

The Pope is a head of state. Though its history may be traced back to the eighth century, the present borders of the Vatican state were defined in 1929 after the Italian army conquered Rome in 1870 making the city the capital of the nation. The Roman Catholic Church is the

only church that also has a sovereign state with its own political, financial, juridical and diplomatic structure. It is the only ecclesial body that deals with other states as a state. When the Church signs agreements with another state in the form of a concordat, for instance, it does so according to the rules of international law, as one sovereign country with another. The Pope is head of the church and head of state. When he visits a nation he is welcomed as if he were a king, not simply as an archbishop or some other ecclesiastical figure. Though small and symbolic, the Church also has an army, like any other state. Its double identity (ecclesial and political) is the fruit of its long and complex history, and is also an indication of its composite institutional nature: *both church and state* in one. Theology and politics are so intertwined in the system of the Roman Catholic Church and its activities that it is impossible to separate them. The Pope is therefore a religious and a political figure.



It was through an artillery-opened breach in the Roman wall - known as the "Porta Pia breach" - that on September 20, 1870, the Italian soldiers entered Rome and completed the unification of Italy.

SERVANT OF GOD'S SERVANTS

This is the only title that underlines humility and service. It counterbalances the absolute claims and prerogatives of the other titles. In the Gospel of John we read these words of Jesus: 'If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet' (John 13:14). The Pope and all priests, therefore, look

to fulfil Christ's injunction to serve the people of God. As the Pope is the Prince of the Apostles, however, he is likewise the Servant of the Servants. Pope Gregory I (590–604) was the first to use this extensively as a papal title, reportedly as a lesson in humility for the Patriarch of Constantinople who had assumed the title 'Ecumenical Patriarch'. Against the background of the other titles, largely shaped by an imperial culture, this one runs the risk of being overtly rhetorical and somewhat overstated.

THE SYMBOLS OF THE PAPACY

Roman Catholicism is a sensual faith. Rather than being based on the discipline of hearing the spoken word, it gives much more attention to visual, olfactory, gestural, ritual and aesthetic dimensions of human life. This is why it has developed such a rich and complex system of symbols for all its actions. This is why liturgy is more important than preaching and sacraments more central than words. The very definition of 'sacrament',⁶ which is paramount for the Roman Catholic faith, with its emphasis on it being a 'sign', 'visible' and part of a 'celebration', witnesses to the 'sensuality' of the Roman Catholic worldview.

The Papacy is no exception. More than any other Western institution it has forged a cluster of symbols to represent its ministry and to express its power even beyond the spiritual and liturgical realms.⁷ The process was slow but steady and reached its peak under Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) who implemented the full range of Papal symbolism that marks Popes to this day.



In the Roman Catholic view, the whole of reality is 'sacramental' in that it witnesses to the visible presence of grace in nature. Why does this tend to underplay the radical effects of sin and to establish a continuity between nature and grace?

Popes hold the seat of Peter (*cathedra Petri*) which can be seen in the Vatican Basilica. It is a seat that tradition says belonged to Peter himself. It symbolizes the reigning Pope's connection with the teaching and ruling authority of the apostle Peter. Historically, however, the seat displayed in St. Peter's is the throne that Charles the Bald donated to Pope John VIII after his coronation in 875. It is therefore an imperial throne that conveys the fullness of the power of the Pope (*plenitudo potestatis*). A cathedral is a Christian church which contains the seat (*cathedra*) of a bishop, but the Pope's seat is far more important than any other seat. The First Vatican Council in 1870 issued the dogma of Papal infallibility, which established the infallibility of the Pope's teaching when he speaks *ex-cathedra* (from the seat of Peter).

Popes also hold the 'keys' of Peter. Since the fifth century the keys have become symbols of the authority conferred to Peter by Jesus. This is according to a disputed interpretation of Matthew 16:19. It was in the thirteenth century, under the rule of Pope Boniface VIII, that Popes began to be represented holding two keys: one for the heavenly kingdom and one for the earthly kingdom. The keys are also the prominent symbols in the Vatican flag.

From the imperial symbolism of power, the Popes

have inherited the papal tiara—a high cap surrounded by three crowns. The tiara bears a globe surmounted by a cross that the Pope wears during certain ceremonies, and which symbolizes his authority. The three crowns signify the threefold power of the Pope as the ‘Father of Kings’, ‘Rector of the World’, and ‘Vicar of Christ’. Historically the Popes have thought of themselves as being ‘emperors’, therefore their reign is analogous to that of political kingdoms with thrones, coronation ceremonies, and royal courts. While it is true that since Paul VI (1963–78) Popes have stopped wearing the tiara and have preferred wearing a more modest miter (a type of headgear), the tiara is still present in the Vatican’s coat of arms and flag.

The Popes’ clothing is also full of imperial and religious symbolism. The red mantle recalls the one used by Roman and Byzantine emperors. The *pallium* (a woolen cloak) is a vestment that emperors gave to high dignitaries. Popes were among those who inherited these vestments and have thus always worn them. The red in the Pope’s clothing also symbolizes the blood of Christ and the martyrs whereas, the white symbolizes the resurrection. Yet, one has to bear in mind that Byzantine emperors also wore white clothes as a sign of purity and nobility.

The language of symbols speaks about the identity of the Papacy as an ‘imperial’ figure. It is true that twentieth century Popes have gradually shifted to a more sober, less striking exercise of the role of the Papacy. Yet, none of the symbols has been abandoned and at various levels they continue to qualify the Papal office in the modern world.