

LESSON TWENTY- ONE – The Papacy

The Papacy

- Some of the same factors that had lifted the church in Rome to prominence by 200 were still operative, but some underwent significant changes.
- Theologically, Rome claimed the apostolic authority of Peter and Paul, but in the 4th and 5th centuries Paul dropped out of the formulations, as the historical memories faded and the textual argument based on the three “Petrine passages” (Matthew 16:16-19; Luke 22:31-32; John 21:15-19) assumed centrality.
- The personal factor of the steadfastness of the bishop of Rome during the Arian controversy-maintained Rome’s reputation for orthodoxy.
- The bishop of Rome never attended an ecumenical council and so kept clear of the intrigues and pressures accompanying these gatherings.
- Organizationally, Rome kept to the usage of a local provincial synod held twice a year.
- Geographically, the Roman bishop, by reason of his location, had a voice that could be heard everywhere.
- Ecclesiastically, Rome was the only patriarchate in the West.
- Politically, Rome in this period was not as important as it had been earlier. Milan was the capital of the region and later Ravenna was to become the capital.
- The word *pope* simply means “father,” and in early times was used to refer to any important and respected bishop.
- The first known use of the word at Rome for its bishop is in an inscription of 303 for Marcellinus, but the word became common at Rome in the 4th century.
- It was used almost exclusively in the West for the Roman bishop from the 6th century.
- The origins of the episcopacy in Rome are not altogether clear. Most scholars agree that Peter did visit Rome and that there is at least a very high probability that he died there.
- This has led some scholars to suggest the possibility that in the beginning Rome did not have a single bishop but rather a collegiate episcopacy, a group of bishops who jointly led the church.
- It was the Germanic invasions that brought about the great upsurge in the pope’s authority. In the East, the empire continued existing for another thousand years. But in the West the church became guardian of what was left of ancient civilization as well as of order and justice.
- Thus, the most prestigious bishop in the West, that of Rome, became the focal point for regaining a unity that had been shattered by invasions.
- Liberius, the bishop of Rome from 352-366, used the term “papa” for himself.
- By far the most important bishop of Rome for advancing the claims of the Roman see in the 4th century was Damasus, who made frequent reference to Rome as the “apostolic see” and spoke of the “primacy of the Roman see” on the basis of Matthew 16:18.
- Leo “the Great,” who was the bishop of Rome from 440-461, has been called the first “pope” in the modern sense. He combined the themes of authority over councils, authority over emperors, and successor of Peter in constructing his theory of the papacy.

- Leo's *Sermon 3*, on the first anniversary of his election as bishop of Rome, elaborated the Petrine theory in terms of the Roman law of inheritance, according to which an heir assumed fully the position of the testator.
- Peter had the keys of the kingdom and authority over other apostles. Peter became the first bishop of Rome, and his authority was transmitted to later bishops of Rome.
- Therefore, the perpetual authority of Peter is found in the Roman bishop, "the vicar of Peter" and "primate of all bishops." Leo took the passages of John 21 and Matthew 16 and disposed of the primitive theory of episcopacy, making the authority of bishops dependent on him.
- Canceling out the position of Cyprian that all bishops share Peter's authority by faith, which did not pass exclusively to Rome, Leo held that in John 21 Jesus Christ extended to all bishops their authority through Peter and his successors.
- The bishop of Rome now stood between Jesus Christ and the other bishops:

"It is true that all bishops taken singly preside each with his proper solicitude over his own flock and know that they will have to give account for the sheep committed to them. To us [bishop of Rome], however, is committed care of all; and no single bishop's administration is other than part of our task."¹

- In that same *Sermon 3*, Leo states

"He is speaking whose representatives we are,"²

- When Leo's *Tome* was read at Chalcedon, the bishops echoed his claim with the acclamation that Peter was speaking through Leo.
- Chalcedon gave an assent to Rome's teaching authority, previously unknown and later seldom acknowledged in the East, but Rome's competence in discipline and jurisdiction were endangered.
- The primacy of Rome was well established in the West, but the story was different in the East, as shown by canon twenty-eight's ranking of Constantinople next to Rome. Rome never accepted that canon.
- In implementation of his theory of the papacy, Leo tried to secure a practical primacy. One challenge came from the metropolitan of Arles, who moved toward development of a patriarchate of his own.
- In 445 Valentinian III supported Rome, a decree that was later an embarrassment to Rome, for it represented the state deciding the constitution of the church.
- In the Christological controversies it is clear that Leo's opinion was not generally accepted simply because he was the bishop of Rome and it took a politically propitious moment for his views to prevail.
- Since Leo intervened in controversies that took place mostly in the East, many Eastern bishops, as well as most Byzantine emperors, saw this as an unwarranted attempt on the part of the bishop of Rome to expand the range of his authority.
- It was only when more favorable emperors came to power that Leo's positions were more generally accepted. This in turn resulted in growing prestige for the papacy.

- In the West, things were different. In 452, Italy was invaded by Attila and the Huns, who had first sought to conquer Constantinople but whom the Byzantine authorities had diverted toward the West, in part by offering them gold.
- They took and sacked the city of Aquileia. The road to Rome was open to them, for there was no army between them and the ancient capital.
- The Western emperor was weak in both character and in resources and the East had given indications that it was unwilling to intervene. It was then that Leo left Rome and marched to meet “the Scourge of God.”
- Leo was still the bishop of Rome in 455, when the Vandals sacked the city. At that time, he was unable to stop the invaders. But it was he who led the negotiations with the Vandal leader and was able to avoid the burning of the city.
- These encounters gave Leo great authority in the city of Rome. That he was able to do these things was due both to his personal gifts and to the political situation of the time, when the civil authorities proved incapable of performing their duties.
- But in Leo’s mind there was a deeper reason. He was convinced that Jesus had made Peter and his successors the rock on which the church was to be built and that therefore the bishop of Rome, Peter’s direct successor, is the head of the church.
- Leo died in 461 and was succeeded by Hilarius, who had been his close associate and who continued his policies.
- But under the next pope, Simplicius, conditions changed. In 476, Odoacer deposed the last Western emperor and thus began in Italy a long period of political chaos.
- In theory, Italy was now part of the Eastern Roman Empire but there were constant tensions between the popes and the Eastern emperors, mostly having to do with the theological controversies to which we shall return shortly.
- Eventually this resulted in a schism between East and West that would take several years to heal.
- This schism was further aggravated by the invasion of Italy by the Ostrogoths. Since they were Arian, tensions resulted in the existence of two rival popes, one supported by the Ostrogoths and the other by Constantinople.
- The new pope was Hormisdas and under his leadership a series of negotiations finally ended the schism with Constantinople.
- Meanwhile the Byzantine Empire was enjoying its brief resurgence under the leadership of Emperor Justinian. It was then that Belisarius invaded Italy and put an end to the kingdom of the Ostrogoths.
- But this did not bring favorable change for the church in Italy, for the emperor and functionaries tried to impose there a situation similar to that which existed in the Eastern empire, where the church was almost completely subject to the state.
- Byzantine power over Italy did not last long. Only 6 years after the last stronghold of the Ostrogoth had been conquered, the Lombards invaded the area.
- After Justinian’s death in 565, Byzantine power began to wane and Constantinople could no longer maintain a strong army in Italy. Those areas that had not been conquered by the Lombards, although technically part of the Eastern Empire, were forced to take measures for their own defense.

- In Rome, the popes became responsible for the preservation of the city against the Lombard threat. When Benedict I died in 579, the Lombards were besieging the city. His successor, Pelagius II, saved it by buying the Lombards off.
- Then, since no help was forthcoming from Constantinople, he turned to the Franks, hoping that they would attack the Lombards from the north. Although these initial negotiations were not fruitful, they pointed to the future, when the Franks would become the main support of the papacy.
- The next pope, Gregory was the ablest man to ever occupy that position. He was born in Rome around 540 to a family of the old aristocracy. At that time Justinian reigned in Constantinople and his generals were fighting the Ostrogoths in Italy.
- Belisarius, Justinian's ablest general, had been recalled to Constantinople and the war dragged on. The Ostrogoth king, Totila, took the offensive for a short time.
- In 545, he besieged Rome, which surrendered the next year. At that time, archdeacon Pelagius (later Pelagius II) went out to meet the victorious king and obtained from him a measure of mercy.
- Shortly after Totila's victory, Belisarius and the Byzantines retook the city, only to lose it again. After years of neglect and repeated sieges, the city was in a grave state of chaos and mismanagement.
- Little is known of Gregory's early years in this struggling city. He may have been an important Roman official but after becoming a Benedictine monk, Pope Benedict made him a deacon.
- The next pope, Pelagius II, appointed Gregory his ambassador before the court of Constantinople. There Gregory spent 6 years, and was often involved in the theological controversies and political intrigues that were constantly boiling in the great city.
- Finally, in 586, Pelagius sent another ambassador and Gregory was able to return to his monastery in Rome, where he was made an abbot.
- At that time the situation in Rome was serious. The Lombards had finally united and intended to conquer the whole of Italy.
- Although some resources were sent from Constantinople for the defense of Rome and although the Lombards were occasionally being attacked from the rear by the Franks, there was a great danger that the city would fall.
- To make matters worse an epidemic broke out in Rome. Shortly before, floods had destroyed much of the food store.
- Then Pope Pelagius, who with the help of Gregory and other monks had organized the sanitation of the city, the burial of the dead, and the feeding of the hungry, became ill and died.
- Under such circumstances, there were not many who wanted the empty post of bishop of Rome. Gregory himself had no wish to become pope, but the clergy and the people elected him. He sought to have his election annulled by writing to the emperor and asking that his appointment not be confirmed.
- By this time, it was customary to request approval from Constantinople before consecrating a bishop in an important see. But his letter was intercepted and eventually, reluctantly, he accepted the position as bishop of Rome.

- Gregory set about his task with a new found zeal. Since there was nobody else to do it, he organized the distribution of food among the needy in Rome and took measures to guarantee the continuing shipments of wheat from Sicily.
- He supervised the rebuilding of the aqueducts and the defenses of the city. The garrison was drilled until morale returned.
- Since there was little expectation of help from Constantinople, Gregory opened direct negotiations with the Lombards and was able to secure peace. By default, the pope was acting as ruler of Rome and the surrounding area which became known as “Saint Peter’s Patrimony.”
- Much later, in the 8th century someone forged a document called the “Donation of Constantine,” which claimed that the great emperor had granted these lands to Saint Peter’s successors.
- Gregory above all considered himself a religious leader. He preached constantly in the various churches in Rome, calling the faithful to renewed commitment. He also took measures to promote clerical celibacy, which was slowly becoming the norm throughout Italy and which many claimed to follow but did not.
- Also, as bishop of Rome, Gregory saw himself as patriarch of the West but he did not claim for himself universal authority, as Leo had done earlier.
- In Spain, he was instrumental in the conversion of the Visigoth population to Nicene-Orthodoxy.
- To England, he sent Augustine’s mission, which would eventually extend the authority of Rome to the British Isles.
- His letters to Africa, dealing with the Donatists were not well received by the local bishops, who wished to guard their independence.
- However, it is not only for these reasons that Gregory is called “the Great.” He was also a prolific writer whose works were very influential throughout the Middle Ages. In these writings, he did not seek to be original or creative.
- His greatest pride was not to say anything that had not been held by the great teachers of earlier centuries, particularly Augustine of Hippo.
- Gregory lived in a time of liberalism, superstition and credulity and to a degree he reflected his age. By making Augustine an infallible teacher, he contradicted the spirit of that teacher, whose genius was, at least in part, in his inquiring spirit and venturesome mind.
- For example, Augustine suggested the possibility that there was a place of purification for those who died in sin, where they would spend some time before going to heaven. On the basis of these speculations by Augustine, Gregory affirmed the existence of such a place and gave push to the development of the doctrine of purgatory.
- It was particularly in that which refers to the doctrine of salvation that Gregory transformed the teachings of Augustine.
- The Augustinian doctrines of predestination and irresistible grace were set aside by Gregory, who was more concerned with the question of how we are to offer satisfaction to God for sin committed. This was done through penance, which consists of contrition,

confession and actual punishment or satisfaction. To these must be added priestly absolution, which confirms the forgiveness granted by God.

- Those who die in the faith and communion of the church, but without having offered satisfaction for all their sins, will go to purgatory before they attain their final salvation. The living can help the dead out of purgatory by offering masses in their favor.
- Gregory believed that in the mass or communion Christ was sacrificed anew. This notion of the mass as sacrifice eventually became standard doctrine of the Western church, until it was rejected by Protestantism in the 16th century.
- Under Gregory's successors, the papacy fell on evil days. Constantinople insisted on asserting its authority over Rome.
- Those who refused were treated harshly. Due to this pressure by the Eastern emperors, Pope Honorius declared himself a Monothelite, which is the heresy that Jesus had two natures but only one will.
- Pope Martin I, disobeyed the emperor's command that there was to be no more discussion of these Christological issues and was kidnapped and taken to Constantinople.
- From then on, all the theological controversies, had serious repercussions in Rome, which could not free itself from the overwhelming power of the emperors of Constantinople.
- During all this time, and until Gregory III, the election of a pope had to be confirmed by the authorities in Constantinople before the candidate could be consecrated as bishop of Rome.
- As Byzantine power in Italy began to wane, the ever-present threat of the Lombards forced the popes to find new support elsewhere and they turned to the Franks.
- It was for this reason that Pope Zacharias agreed to have Childeric III deposed and Pepin crowned in his stead.
- When the Lombards threatened again, Stephen appealed to Pepin, who twice invaded Italy and granted the pope several cities that the Lombards had taken.
- The protests of the government at Constantinople need not be heeded and the popes became rulers of a vast portion of Italy.
- From that point, the alliance between the Franks and the popes grew closer. Finally, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne emperor of the West on Christmas Day, 800.
- One other pope of note during this time was Gelasius, who was bishop of Rome from 492-496. He developed the religio-political theory of Leo.
- Gelasius realized that the acclaim of emperor Marcian at Chalcedon as teacher of the church and priest-king was fraught with danger.
- The Old Testament functionaries of prophet, priest and king, Gelasius proclaimed, were filled by Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man. Only one who was divine could fill all three. Among human beings, these functions must be kept separate.
- Gelasius's viewpoint of the superiority of priests over kings was to be echoed throughout the Middle Ages.
- Gelasius repeated the claim that it was the office of the Roman church to judge other churches, but to be judged by no human tribunal.
- The West now regarded the kingdom of Jesus Christ as embodied in the church, whereas the East persisted in the Eusebian ideal of a Christianized empire.

¹ Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 304

² Church History, Volume One, Ferguson, Everett, page 304