

In other Catholic Answers tracts, we have shown that the Church Fathers recognized that Jesus made Peter the rock on which he would build his Church, that this gave Peter a special primacy, that Peter went to Rome, and that he left successors there. In this tract we will show that they also understood that Peter's successors shared in his special authority or primacy.

In a wide variety of ways, the Fathers attest to the fact that the church of Rome was the central and most authoritative church. They attest to the Church's reliance on Rome for advice, for mediation of disputes, and for guidance on doctrinal issues. They note, as Ignatius of Antioch does, that Rome "holds the presidency" among the other churches, and that, as Irenaeus explains, "because of its superior origin, all the churches must agree" with Rome. They are also clear on the fact that it is communion with Rome and the bishop of Rome that causes one to be in communion with the Catholic Church. This displays a recognition that, as Cyprian of Carthage puts it, Rome is "the principal church, in which sacerdotal unity has its source."

Most significant are the passages below in which the popes, by their statements or their actions, reveal their understanding of their own authority in the Church, such as when Pope Clement I commanded the church of Corinth to reinstate its leadership, or when Pope Victor excommunicated the churches of Asia Minor as a group, after which the other bishops sought to change Victor's mind but did not challenge his authority to have made the excommunication.

In this tract we will cover the views of the popes and other Church Fathers up to the year A.D. 341. The views of the Fathers after this period will be covered in the tract, *The Authority of the Pope, Part II*.

POPE CLEMENT I

"Owing to the sudden and repeated calamities and misfortunes which have befallen us, we must acknowledge that we have been somewhat tardy in turning our attention to the matters in dispute

among you, beloved; and especially that abominable and unholy sedition, alien and foreign to the elect of God, which a few rash and self-willed persons have inflamed to such madness that your venerable and illustrious name, worthy to be loved by all men, has been greatly defamed. . . . Accept our counsel and you will have nothing to regret. . . . If anyone disobey the things which have been said by him [God] through us [i.e., that you must reinstate your leaders], let them know that they will involve themselves in transgression and in no small danger. . . . You will afford us joy and gladness if being obedient to the things which we have written through the Holy Spirit, you will root out the wicked passion of jealousy" (*Letter to the Corinthians* 1, 58–59, 63 [A.D. 80]).

HERMAS

"Therefore shall you [Hermas] write two little books and send one to Clement [Bishop of Rome] and one to Grapte. Clement shall then send it to the cities abroad, because that is his duty" (*The Shepherd* 2:4:3 [A.D. 80]).

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

"Ignatius . . . to the church also which holds the presidency, in the location of the country of the Romans, worthy of God, worthy of honor, worthy of blessing, worthy of praise, worthy of success, worthy of sanctification, and, because you hold the presidency in love, named after Christ and named after the Father" (*Letter to the Romans* 1:1 [A.D. 110]).

"You [the church at Rome] have envied no one, but others you have taught. I desire only that what you have enjoined in your instructions may remain in force" (*ibid.*, 3:1).

DIONYSIUS OF CORINTH

"For from the beginning it has been your custom to

do good to all the brethren in various ways and to send contributions to all the churches in every city. . . . This custom your blessed Bishop Soter has not only preserved, but is augmenting, by furnishing an abundance of supplies to the saints and by urging with consoling words, as a loving father his children, the brethren who are journeying" (*Letter to Pope Soter* in Eusebius, *Church History* 4:23:9 [A.D. 170]).

"Today we have observed the Lord's holy day, in which we have read your letter [Pope Soter]. Whenever we do read it [in church], we shall be able to profit thereby, as also we do when we read the earlier letter written to us by Clement" (*ibid.*, 4:23:11).

THE MARTYRS OF LYONS

"And when a dissension arose about these said people [the Montanists], the brethren in Gaul once more . . . [sent letters] to the brethren in Asia and Phrygia and, moreover to Eleutherius, who was then [A.D. 175] bishop of the Romans, negotiating for the peace of the churches" (Eusebius, *Church History* 5:3:4 [A.D. 312])

"And the same martyrs too commended Irenaeus, already at that time [A.D. 175] a presbyter of the community of Lyons, to the said bishop of Rome, rendering abundant testimony to the man, as the following expressions show: 'Once more and always we pray that you may rejoice in God, Pope Eleutherius. This letter we have charged our brother and companion Irenaeus to convey to you, and we beg you to receive him as zealous for the covenant of Christ'" (*ibid.*, 5:4:1–2).

IRENAEUS

"But since it would be too long to enumerate in such a volume as this the succession of all the churches, we shall confound all those who, in whatever manner, whether through self-satisfaction or vainglory, or through blindness and wicked opinion, assemble other than where it is proper, by pointing out here

the successions of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul, that church which has the tradition and the faith which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the apostles. With that church, because of its superior origin, all the churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world, and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic tradition" (*Against Heresies* 3:3:2 [A.D. 189]).

EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA

"A question of no small importance arose at that time [A.D. 190]. For the parishes of all Asia [Minor], as from an older tradition held that the fourteenth day of the moon, on which the Jews were commanded to sacrifice the lamb, should be observed as the feast of the Savior's Passover. . . . But it was not the custom of the churches in the rest of the world . . . as they observed the practice which, from apostolic tradition, has prevailed to the present time, of terminating the fast [of Lent] on no other day than on that of the resurrection of the Savior [Sunday]. Synods and assemblies of bishops were held on this account, and all, with one consent, through mutual correspondence drew up an ecclesiastical decree that the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be celebrated on no other but the Lord's day and that we should observe the close of the paschal fast on this day only. . . . Thereupon [Pope] Victor, who presided over the church at Rome, immediately attempted to cut off from the community the parishes of all Asia [Minor], with the churches that agreed with them, as heterodox. And he wrote letters and declared all the brethren there wholly excommunicate. But this did not please all the bishops, and they besought him to consider the things of peace and of neighborly unity and love. . . . [Irenaeus] fittingly admonishes Victor that he should not cut off whole churches of God which observed the tradition of an ancient custom" (*Church History* 5:23:1–24:11).

• • •

"Thus then did Irenaeus entreat and negotiate [with Pope Victor] on behalf of the peace of the churches—[Irenaeus being] a man well-named, for he was a peacemaker both in name and character. And he corresponded by letter not only with Victor, but also with very many and various rulers of churches" (ibid., 24:18).

CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE

"The Lord says to Peter: 'I say to you,' he says, 'that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. And to you I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever things you bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, they shall be loosed also in heaven' [Matt. 16:18–19]). . . . On him [Peter] he builds the Church, and to him he gives the command to feed the sheep [John 21:17], and although he assigns a like power to all the apostles, yet he founded a single chair [*cathedra*], and he established by his own authority a source and an intrinsic reason for that unity. Indeed, the others were also what Peter was [i.e., apostles], but a primacy is given to Peter, whereby it is made clear that there is but one Church and one chair. So too, all [the apostles] are shepherds, and the flock is shown to be one, fed by all the apostles in single-minded accord. If someone does not hold fast to this unity of Peter, can he imagine that he still holds the faith? If he [should] desert the chair of Peter upon whom the Church was built, can he still be confident that he is in the Church?" (*The Unity of the Catholic Church* 4; 1st edition [A.D. 251]).

"Cyprian to [Pope] Cornelius, his brother. Greeting. . . . We decided to send and are sending a letter to you from all throughout the province [where I am] so that all our colleagues might give their decided approval and support to you and to your communion, that is, to both the unity and the charity of the Catholic Church" (*Letters* 48:1, 3 [A.D. 253]).

• • •

"Cyprian to Antonian, his brother. Greeting. . . . You wrote . . . that I should forward a copy of the same letter to our colleague [Pope] Cornelius, so that, laying aside all anxiety, he might at once know that you held communion with him, that is, with the Catholic Church" (ibid., 55[52]:1).

"Cornelius was made bishop by the decision of God and of his Christ, by the testimony of almost all the clergy, by the applause of the people then present, by the college of venerable priests and good men . . . when the place of Fabian, which is the place of Peter, the dignity of the sacerdotal chair, was vacant. Since it has been occupied both at the will of God and with the ratified consent of all of us, whoever now wishes to become bishop must do so outside [the Church]. For he cannot have ecclesiastical rank who does not hold to the unity of the Church" (ibid., 55[52]:8).

"With a false bishop appointed for themselves by heretics, they dare even to set sail and carry letters from schismatics and blasphemers to the chair of Peter and to the principal church [at Rome], in which sacerdotal unity has its source" (ibid., 59:14).

FIRMILIAN

"[Pope] Stephen . . . boasts of the place of his episcopate, and contends that he holds the succession from Peter, on whom the foundations of the Church were laid [Matt. 16:18]. . . . Stephen . . . announces that he holds by succession the throne of Peter" (collected in Cyprian's *Letters* 74[75]:17 [A.D. 253]).

POPE JULIUS I

"[The] judgment [concerning Athanasius] ought to have been made, not as it was, but according to the ecclesiastical canon. It behooved all of you to write us so that the justice of it might be seen as emanating from all. . . . Are you ignorant that the custom has been to write first to us and then for a just decision to be passed from this place [Rome]? If, then,

any such suspicion rested upon the bishop there [Athanasius of Alexandria], notice of it ought to have been written to the church here. But now, after having done as they pleased, they want to obtain our concurrence, although we never condemned him. Not thus are the constitutions of Paul, not thus the traditions of the Fathers. This is another form of procedure, and a novel practice. . . . What I write about this is for the common good. For what we have heard from the blessed apostle Peter, these things I signify to you" (*Letter on Behalf of Athanasius* [A.D. 341], in Athanasius, *Apology Against the Arians* 20–35).

CATHOLIC ANSWERS
2020 Gillespie Way, El Cajon, CA 92020
Toll free order line: (888) 291-8000
Web: www.catholic.com

Church & Papacy

THE FATHERS KNOW BEST

THE AUTHORITY OF THE POPE: PART I