

POPE LEO WINS A GREAT VICTORY FOR PAPAL PRIMACY AT CHALCEDON

During the fourth and fifth centuries, the papacy made continual headway in advancing its claims to a primacy over the whole Church. It may be true, as some historians say, that the Council of Nicaea (325) "knew nothing of the doctrine of papal supremacy," yet T. Jalland, who quotes this opinion with approval, acknowledges that until the fourth quarter of the fourth century the Church had hardly yet accustomed itself to "speak in the language of jurisdiction whether papal or otherwise, and that in consequence the crucial question which she possessed its plenitude did not arise." And then Jalland goes on to say, "It is clear that the Church was moving in the direction of providing herself with the machinery for corporate action as an oecumenical society on an equal footing with an oecumenical State." And as a matter of fact, we see the bishops of Rome defining their role as chief shepherds of the flock of Christ with growing consistency and precision. Pope Damasus (366-84) at a council in 382 seems to have claimed formally the possession of a primacy over all other churches in virtue not of conciliar decisions but of the Lord's promise to St. Peter. Pope Siricius (384-89) goes a step farther: He not only hears appeals but even starts to take the initiative. In his letters-which for the first time are now called *Decretals*-he implicitly claims the right to make

decisions, with universal application in matters both doctrinal and disciplinary.

It is true that these claims did not meet with perfect acquiescence on all sides. The attitude of the East was quite ambivalent, as we shall see a little later in connection with Pope Leo. But even in the West there was ambiguity. The African Church, for instance, was jealous of its independence, and the bishops there were quite ready to question Roman attempts to interfere with their doctrinal and disciplinary decisions. When Pope Zosimus (417-18) seemed on the point of reversing their condemnation of Pelagius, they reacted vigorously and persuaded Zosimus to join them in condemning Pelagius. On the other hand, we have to recognize with Jalland certain signs "of a conviction, in some measure shared by the Africans with the rest of the Church, that if a local decision was to possess universal validity, it must in some way be supported by a verdict of the Roman see."² It is sometimes urged that Augustine himself was hostile to the exercise of Roman jurisdiction over the African Church. It is true that he gives various and conflicting interpretations of the famous text of Matthew, "Thou art Peter," at one time identifying Peter himself with the rock, while later interpreting it of Christ. And on several occasions he complained bitterly about Rome's exercise of its appellate powers—even threatening to resign if Rome reinstated a young priest whom Augustine had suspended. But we cannot say that he repudiated the

appellate jurisdiction of the Roman see. And we must remember, in any case, that he never elaborated any carefully thought-out theory of authority in the Church. So we simply can't say what his final views on the primacy of Rome might have been.

When we come to the reign of Pope Leo I (440-61) we reach one of the momentous turning points in the history of the papacy. By common consent of historians, Leo was one of the greatest of ecclesiastical statesmen and deservedly surnamed "the Great." At a time when the world was cracking at the seams, Leo stood forth as a Pope of commanding character and genius who dramatically and successfully asserted the supreme authority of the papacy. Drawing on the rich heritage of papal experience and claims, he formulated a doctrine of papal primacy that was to weather all storms and guide the policy of all subsequent Popes. According to Leo, Peter was "the Rock" on which the Lord built his Church; his successors, the Popes, were merely his temporary and mystical personifications. In virtue of his office, the Pope had the plenitude of power over the universal Church: He was its supreme ruler, its supreme teacher, and its supreme judge. All other bishop only shared in his responsibility for the whole church.

It was important for the history of the papacy the Leo not only enunciated this grandiose theory of papal primacy, but also that by and large he made its claims good. He exercised

authority in Spain and North Africa: he frustrated the attempt to create an independent Gallic see in Arles—even going so far as to strip the saintly Hilary of his metropolitan authority there. In 445 he secured an edict from the western Emperor, Valentinian III, who instructed the military commander in Gaul, the famous Aetius, that “the primacy of the Apostolic see as appropriate to St. Peter” must be observed.

Leo came to the papal office as twilight fell over the Roman Empire. His contemporary Aetius, the last effective Roman general in the West, strove valiantly to save Gaul and Italy from the universal doom, but he won his most notable victories only by using barbarian against barbarian. In 436 Aetius gained a resounding victory over the Visigoths with the help of the Huns and then defeated Attila and the Huns in 451 with the help of the Visigoths. Aetius himself was murdered later by the Emperor himself, the degenerate Valentinian III, who in a jealous pique cut him down with his sword; six months later Aetius' guards returned the favor by assassinating Valentinian. In the vacuum of secular leadership, it was Leo who virtually took charge of the city's fate. In 452 he traveled to Mantua to meet Attila and dissuade him from attacking Rome. Attila turned aside and Rome was saved—for the moment. A few years later Gaiseric the Vandal, having subdued Africa, launched his fleet against Rome; again it was Leo who met the conqueror—this time at the gates of the city itself.

Gaiseric did not turn aside but at the insistence of the Pope he limited himself to a peaceful sack.

Leo's most memorable exercise of authority, however, occurred in connection with an acute doctrinal crisis that faced the Church during his pontificate. It began in Constantinople when an old monk there named Eutyches, a dabbler rather than a real theologian, was summoned before a synod on the charge of teaching heresy. At issue were some of his statements regarding the relation of the human to the divine in Christ. He was duly found guilty and relieved of his office by Patriarch Flavian. Things might ordinarily have rested. But as it turned out, Eutyches was merely a pawn in the game of the scheming, ambitious patriarch of Alexandria, Dioscoros, who was searching for just such an incident to embarrass his rival Flavian. Dioscoros succeeded in turning the tables against Flavian. Dioscoros blew the whole matter up into a major crisis, leveled charges of heresy at Flavian himself, and with the help of his friend the chamberlain Chrysaphius, the chief adviser of the Emperor, persuaded the Emperor to call a council to settle the issue.

The question that pitted Dioscoros and Eutyches against Flavian was the continuation of a long-standing controversy over the relation of the human to the divine in Christ that divided the two major schools of theology in the East, Antioch and Alexandria. Antioch's greatest authority,

Theodore of Mopsuestia, was influential in shaping its theology, which insisted on the full and genuine manhood of Christ. In describing how divinity and humanity were united in Christ, however, the Antiochenes left themselves open to the charge that the union was only moral rather than essential. Alexandria's most revered theologian, Cyril, on the other hand, so emphasized the unity of manhood and divinity in Christ that he was accused of submerging the humanity in the divinity.

One of the thorny questions raised in the controversy had to do with the various statements in the Scripture about Christ-some relative to his humanity, some of his divinity. More specifically, it was asked whether these statements could be predicted interchangeably of either his humanity or his divinity-in other words, whether one could say that God suffered on the cross (as some liturgies did) or that Jesus created the world. In accordance with their belief in the most intimate union conceivable of deity and humanity in Christ, the Alexandrians favored a complete exchange of subjects and predicates in statements about the God-man. The Antiochenes, on the other hand, shied away from what they thought were extremes in this practice. And Nestorius, Flavian's predecessor and a partisan of the Antiochene school, brought about his downfall when he took umbrage at the expression "Mother of God" (in Greek *Theotokos*), in reference to Christ's mother. Nestorius' demise took place at the Council of Ephesus in

431, which saw the triumph of the Alexandrian theology when *Theotokos* was endorsed by the bishops and approval was given to Cyril's expression:

"The Logos himself suffered in the flesh." Nestorius was condemned as a heretic and exiled to Egypt.

Ephesus failed to bring peace between the two schools. A bloc of bishops under John of Antioch refused to subscribe to the decrees of Ephesus. A compromise was eventually arranged in 433, when the disputants signed a formula that spoke of a "union between two natures," but even this failed to satisfy the intransigents of both schools. Dioscoros, the supporter of Eutyches and adversary of Flavian was one of these intransigents. As patriarch of Alexandria Dioscoros was looking for a way to secure a definitive triumph for the Alexandrian Christology and discredit the Antiochene school. So, as we have said, he found a perfect tool in Eutyches, a monk of Constantinople but a partisan of the Alexandrian theology. Dioscoros counted, moreover, on his friend Chrysaphius, the Emperor's trusted adviser, to bring matters to a favorable conclusion.

And so it turned out-at first. The Emperor called a council together at Ephesus in 449 and appointed Dioscoros to preside. Backed by an army of monks, favored by the Emperor and supported by most of the 130 bishops present, Dioscoros had everything his own way.

Liberty of speech was sharply curtailed. The bishops listened to Eutyches recite his grievances against Flavian and then applauded his confession: "Two natures before the union; after the union, one nature." Dioscoros then proceeded against Flavian, whom he accused of changing the faith of Nicaea and Ephesus by adding his doctrine of the "two natures." Sentence of deposition was passed against Flavian; those bishops who were reluctant to sign it were compelled to do so by soldiers amid scenes of violence and disorder. Flavian was treated as a prisoner, and if rumor is trustworthy, his death four days later was due to the rough handling he received.

Where was Pope Leo during all of this? At the inception of the struggle between Dioscoros and Flavian, the Pope studied the matter and decided in favor of Flavian. To him he addressed a letter dealing with the theological issue involved. Called the Tome, it set forth the principles of a solution to the dogmatic issue and is generally considered a masterpiece of dogmatic theology. As to Dioscoros' council, he was adamantly opposed but yielded to necessity and sent his legates.

When word finally reached Leo of the goings on at the Council of Ephesus, he was outraged. He dubbed Dioscoros' council a *latrocinium* or synod of robbers—a label that stuck to it. Leo then did his utmost to rally the Church against the heresy of Dioscoros and Eutyches. To Emperor Theodosius Pope Leo wrote a strong letter asserting his power as

successor of Peter to maintain the truth and calling on Theodosius to hold a general council to redress the injury inflicted on the Church's doctrine by the robber synod. The Pope had little success with the Emperor, who declared the question settled. But Leo was able to convince the Emperor's sister Pulcheria of the rightness of his cause.

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She turned out to be a key personage. When Theodosius suffered a fatal fall from his horse, Pulcheria married his successor, Marcian, and the two reversed the policy of Theodosius. They decided to call another council to settle the issue along the lines of Leo's *Tome*. Leo, however, now had second thoughts about the wisdom of having a council. He felt that his *Tome*-which was read and applauded widely throughout the Church-could settle the dogmatic issue by itself given sufficient time for its dissemination, while he saw grave risks to the papal primacy if a council were held. It might tempt the patriarch of Constantinople-in league with Marcian-to arrogate increased ecclesiastical power to himself and so weaken papal primacy. But Leo was overruled by Marcian. In obedience to the Emperor then, more than five hundred bishops-the largest such gathering in history so far-met at Chalcedon across the Bosphorus from the capital on October 8, 451. They filled the magnificent basilica of St. Euphemia under the watchful eyes of eighteen imperial commissioners. The only Western bishops, besides two

refugees from Africa, were the papal legates, who were given the seats of honor at the left of the commissioners. At the insistence of the papal legates who presided, Dioscoros was seated among the accused. The Acts of Flavian's Synod of Constantinople were read, followed by the Acts of the "robber synod." The atmosphere was one of extreme tension-cheers, imprecations, and groans burst out spontaneously as the proceedings unfolded. The trial of Dioscoros lasted well into the night, and candles had to be brought in. As evidence piled up of the unseemly and even violent methods used by Dioscoros to gain his triumph at Ephesus, his supporters gradually deserted him until he was left with only twelve bishops. Sentence of deposition was finally leveled against him by the papal legates: "Leo, through us and the present holy Synod, together with St. Peter . . . deprives him of his episcopal office and of all sacerdotal dignity." When Leo's Tome was read to them, they cried: "This is the faith of the Fathers and of the Apostles. This we all believe. Peter has spoken through Leo; thus Cyril taught; Leo and Cyril teach the same; anathema to him who teaches otherwise. . . ."

The bishops would have left matters rest there having declared that orthodoxy on the question was adequately expressed in the creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople, the letters of Cyril, and the Tome of Leo. But the imperial commissioners wanted to close all loopholes and make an airtight definition that would secure the religious unity of

the Empire. Or perhaps they feared that a simple ratification of Leo's Tome by the assembly would ascribe too much importance to papal authority. In any case, at their insistence a committee went to work to draft a definition. Their first proposal pleased the majority but not the papal legates, who demanded a definition more in harmony with Leo's Tome; in particular, they wanted Leo's phrase "two natures" to replace the one used, "out of two natures." But the majority refused to budge until finally the imperial commissioners confronted them with the pointed question: "Whom do you follow Leo, or Dioscoros, who accepts 'out of two natures' but rejects [Leo's] 'two natures'?" "As Leo believes, so do we . . .," they replied. "Then you must follow Leo in stating that 'two natures are united without change, and without division, and without confusion in Christ.'" So they went back to work and drew up a new formulary, which secured the adherence of the whole council. Faithfully reflecting the thought of Leo, it says:

One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, made known in two natures [which exist] without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the difference of the natures having been in no wise taken away by reason of the union, but rather the properties of each being preserved, and [both] concurring into one Person (prosopon) and one hypostasis-not parted or divided into two Persons (prosopa) but one and the same Son and

Only-begotten, the divine Logos, the Lord Jesus Christ
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Leo had won a great dogmatic victory, but he failed to unite Christendom. Two schisms occurred: The Nestorians rejected the formula of Chalcedon because they felt it confused the relations of the divine persons within the Trinity, the Monophysites denied that Christ's humanity was consubstantial with ours. Even the Byzantines themselves for a long time tended to interpret Chalcedon in a pro-Monophysite sense-mainly for political reasons.

Moreover, Leo's forebodings about the Council being used to set up Constantinople as a rival to Rome proved prophetic. Against the vehement protests of the papal legates, the Council passed Canon 28. It states:

Following in all things the decision of the holy Fathers and acknowledging the canon, which has just been read, of the One Hundred and Fifty Bishops beloved-of-God (who assembled in the Imperial city of Constantinople, which is New Rome, in the time of the Emperor Theodosius of happy memory), we also do enact and decree the same things concerning the privileges of the most holy Church of Constantinople, which is New Rome. For the Fathers rightly granted privileges to the throne of Old Rome, because it was the imperial city;: And the One Hundred and Fifty most religious bishops, actuated by the same consideration, gave equal privileges to the most holy throne of New Rome, justly judging that the city which is

honored with the Sovereignty and the Senate, and enjoys equal privileges with the old imperial Rome, should in ecclesiastical matters also be magnified as she is, and rank next after her so that in the Pontic, the Asian, and the Thracian Dioceses, the metropolitans only and such bishops also of the Dioceses aforesaid as are among the barbarians should be ordained by the aforesaid most holy throne of the most holy Church of Constantinople; every metropolitan of the aforesaid dioceses, together with the bishops of his province, ordaining his own provincial bishops, as has been declared by the divine canons; but that, as has been above said, the metropolitans of the aforesaid Dioceses should be ordained by the archbishop of Constantinople, after the proper elections have been held according to custom and have been reported to him.

Pope Leo objected and refused to accept this canon. There were several reasons for his stand: First, Canon 3 of the Council of Constantinople (referred to at the beginning of Canon 28) had granted only an honorary precedence to the see of Constantinople; now Canon 28 of Chalcedon raised Constantinople to a position of such magnitude that when supported by the Emperors it might severely threaten the unity of the Church and endanger Rome's primacy. Second, Canon 28 was based exclusively on the principle of political accommodation; no reference was made to apostolicity, which by this time was

generally accepted in the West as the "decisive factor in Church leadership."⁶

As a result Pope Leo rejected the canon as a defiance of ancient custom and defended the right of Alexandria to second place in the Church, as the see founded by St. Mark.

The dispute at bottom, as we can now see with the aid of much historical hindsight, was not only over two principles of Church organization but also a confusion over two types of primacy: directional vs. administrative. The directional primacy—the right to be the final court of appeal in matters of faith affecting the essential doctrinal unity of the Church surely belonged to Rome as the apostolic see and the definitive see of Peter. But there was also need for the other type: a patriarchal or administrative primacy whereby certain sees because of their political and social importance had acquired the right to make final decisions in disciplinary questions affecting the churches within their sphere of influence so as to maintain the basic degree of liturgical and disciplinary uniformity. Like Alexandria and Antioch earlier, Constantinople had certainly won the right to such a primacy.

The inability of Rome and Constantinople to make such a distinction was a tragic matter. Even though things were temporarily patched up, with Leo accepting a conciliatory letter from the patriarch of Constantinople, who agreed not to officially promulgate Canon 28, the misunderstanding

continued to bedevil the relations between the two sees and finally played a major role in the final schism of the Middle Ages.

But Leo had done his work well for the future of Western Christendom. He left behind a papacy that was now fully conscious of its prerogatives and equipped with the prestige to carry them out; a papacy that was ready, when the empire totally collapsed, to embark on one of its greatest historic missions: taming the barbarians and salvaging for humanity the elements of the ancient civilization.