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Denis Kaiser
Andrews University, denis@andrews.edu

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LEO THE GREAT ON THE SUPREMACY OF THE BISHOP OF ROME

DENIS KAISER
Ph.D. Candidate in Adventist Studies (Andrews University)
denis@andrews.edu

Abstract

Pope Leo the Great built his rationale for the supreme authority of the bishop of Rome on an existing tradition, yet with his additions he developed a theoretical rationale for later papal claims to absolute and supreme power in the ecclesiastical and secular realms. Previous bishops and church leaders had laid increasing stress on the unique role of the Apostle Peter as the founder of the Roman churches and episcopacy, the significance of the Roman bishop as Peter's successor, and the apostolic significance of the city and episcopacy of Rome. Yet Leo's rationale for the absolute control and power of the Roman bishop was founded on the ideas that Peter was still present and active in his successors, all ecclesiastical authority was mediated through him, Rome as a ecclesial monarchy was supposed to rule supreme above all churches, and Peter with his successors were to rule the universal church.

Keywords: Pope Leo the Great, papal primacy, Petrine primacy, leadership, Catholic theology, historical theology.

Introduction

Born to a Tuscan family possibly in Velathri about A.D. 400, Leo was raised and educated in Rome during the first two decades of the fifth century. Having entered the clergy at an early age, he quickly rose to a position of importance.¹ He

¹Philip A. McShane, "Leo I (440-61)," in *The Great Popes through History: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Frank J. Coppa (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002), 51; *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis): The Ancient Biographies of the First Ninety Roman Bishops to A.D. 715*, 2nd rev. ed., Translated Texts for Historians, vol. 6 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 38-40. The following references illustrate Leo's increasing importance in ecclesiastical affairs already before his episcopate. Thus Augustine mentioned a Leo, an acolyte, bearing messages from Pope Zosimus. See *Ep.* 104. In the Christological conflict, Cyril of Alexandria received help from Pope Celestine's deacon Leo who in turn asked John Cassian to prepare a treatise (*De incarnatione*). Prosper of Aquitaine indicated Leo's intervention was essential in convincing Pope Sixtus III to refrain from reinstating the

was the first pope who received the designation “the Great,” and the Roman Catholic Church considers him as one of the thirty-six doctors of the church. His significance is seen particularly in the rationale he provided for the supremacy of the bishop of Rome over all Christianity. Prior to Leo’s episcopate several developments had already taken place that shaped the theological and ecclesiastical views of the bishops and people at Rome and in the *catholic* churches.² However, during his episcopate (A.D. 440-461) Leo the Great distinguished himself by providing at least four additional arguments for the authority of the Roman bishop. The present article will explore Leo’s sermons and letters in order to outline his teachings on the presence of the Apostle Peter in his successors, his mediatorship of all ecclesiastical authority, the supremacy of Rome above all Christian churches, and the power of Peter and his successor the bishop of Rome to rule the universal Christian church, and to determine how they relate to previous views.³

The Presence of Peter in His Successors

While the Apostle Peter had a special significance for the churches in the city of Rome, in the early centuries, he did not yet have the unique position he would assume in later centuries. The following paragraphs demonstrate that Leo the Great built on an existing tradition, yet he tried to establish the unique authority of the see of the Roman bishops by substantiating the presence of Peter in his successors by means of Scripture and legal concepts.

Pelagian bishop Julian of Eclanum. Just before his election as pope, Leo was on a mission to intermeditate between the Roman general Aetius and the praetorian prefect Albinus. See McShane, “Leo I (440-61),” 51, 52.

²Scholars have investigated the theological developments regarding the issue of authority during the first three centuries, yet they usually follow different hermeneutical approaches and aim at diverse agendas often based on their denominational setting. See Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen, *Kirchliches Amt und geistliche Vollmacht in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1953); Francis A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York: Newman, 2001).

³Besides Leo’s famous *Tome*, written in A.D. 449, there are extant 143 letters and 96 sermons. Most of his sermons follow the classical format of *keerygma*, *didache*, and *parenesis*. While he frequently mentioned Peter in his sermons, his references are rather incidental in character and usually located in a liturgical setting. Occasions for these sermons were, e.g., anniversaries of Leo’s consecration as pope, sermons about fasting and giving alms, the celebration of the vigils, and Christmas. See Tad W. Guzie, “Word and Worship in the Preaching of Saint Leo the Great: A Dissertation” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1970), 21, 22; Edward P. Pepka, “The Theology of St. Peter’s Presence in His Successors According to St. Leo the Great” (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1986), 90, 93.

Until the late second century A.D. Christian literature mentioned both Peter and Paul as founders and organizers of the church at Rome.⁴ Afterwards the focus and emphasis shifted however towards Peter. Thus Tertullian of Carthage (A.D. 150-230) mentioned that some “apostolic churches” possessed registers of episcopal succession and the Roman church had records proving that Clement had been ordained by Peter to be his successor as bishop of Rome.⁵ Later writers argued that the church owed Peter special honor as he had been the founder of both the congregations and the episcopal succession of Rome.⁶ Even two commemorative days were eventually celebrated in his honor.⁷

Leo the Great used the passage in Matt 16:16-19 as *locus classicus* for his reasoning that Peter and his successors received a divinely instituted office and priesthood.⁸ Although he viewed Christ as the ultimate and “impregnable rock,” he regarded Peter as the rock whose stability and firmness was poured out into his successors.⁹ He reasoned that Peter could not have known all by himself the things he confessed about Christ for they went beyond what human minds or eyes could perceive. Leo therefore concluded it was the Father in Heaven who had

⁴Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.2–3; Hegesippus as quoted in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.22.1-3. The list of Hegesippus was completely preserved by Epiphanius of Salamis who lived in the fourth century A.D. See Epiphanius, *Pan.* 27.6. Eusebius still cited these lists in the first half of the fourth century. See e.g. *Hist. eccl.* 5.6.1–5; 3.2, 13, 15, 34; 4.1, 4. Further information can be found in Burnett Hillman Streeter, *The Primitive Church: Studied with Special Reference to the Origins of the Christian Ministry* (London: Macmillan, 1929), 290-295; Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers: Part 1: S. Clement of Rome* (London: Macmillan, 1890), 208, 209, 326-333; and Kenneth A. Strand, “Peter and Paul in Relationship to the Episcopal Succession in the Church at Rome,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 30, no. 3 (1992): 219-222.

⁵Tertullian, *Praescr.* 32; cf. Strand, “Peter and Paul,” 222; Roberts, Alexander, and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (1885; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 3:258.

⁶See Optatus, *De schism. Donat.*, 2.3; Augustine, *Epist.* 53, *ad Generosum*, par. 2; cf. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 171-174; Strand, “Peter and Paul,” 222, 223. “The cult of Peter had already far surpassed all other cults in Rome.” See Bernhard Schimmelpfennig, *The Papacy*, transl. James Sievert (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 25. Cyprian of Carthage was very clear on Peter’s supremacy. See Adrian Fortescue, *The Early Papacy: to the Synod of Chalcedon in 451*, ed. Scott M. P. Reid, 3rd ed. (Southampton: Saint Austin Press, 1997), 45-47.

⁷June 29 was celebrated as the day of his death, and February 22 as the anniversary of his taking of the office as the first bishop of Rome (the festival of the *cathedra petri*).

⁸*Serm.* 3.2, 3.3.

⁹*Serm.* 24.6, 5.4. See also Myron Wojtowysch, *Papsttum und Konzile von den Anfängen bis zu Leo I. (440-461): Studien zur Entstehung der Überordnung des Papstes über Konzile*, ed. Georg Denzler, *Päpste und Papsttum*, vol. 17 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1981), 304.

revealed these things to the Apostle Peter.¹⁰ That incident had far-reaching consequences for the church because it gave Peter absolute authority.

[Peter had] received the fullness of blessing, and was endued with the holy firmness of the inviolable Rock on which the Church should be built and conquer the gates of hell and the laws of death, so that, in loosing or binding the petitions of any whatsoever, only that should be ratified in heaven which had been settled by the judgment of Peter.¹¹

Leo described the foundational role of the Apostle Peter in a number of ways. Thus he interpreted Jesus' statements in Matt 16:16-19 and 18:18 as an ordination of Peter before the other apostles "in such a way that from his being called the Rock, from his being pronounced the Foundation, from his being constituted the Doorkeeper of the kingdom of heaven, from his being set as the Umpire to bind and to loose, whose judgments shall retain their validity in heaven."¹² In his view, the universal church was founded "on the very citadel of the Apostolic Rock."¹³ The solidity of Peter's faith was perpetual and on him was reared the entire structure of the church. Leo argued that as Peter's faith in Christ remained continually so what Christ instituted in Peter remained too, revealing the latter as "the chief of the apostles" who does not cease to operate.¹⁴

He believed the Apostle Peter was still active and continued to perform faithfully the work entrusted to him by Christ.¹⁵ Peter's "power lives," and his "authority prevails in his See."¹⁶ Moreover, Peter was "not only the patron of this [Roman] see, but also the primate of all bishops" in the entire world.¹⁷ Leo thought he gave only Peter's warning and preached nothing else than his teaching.¹⁸ He repeatedly expressed his belief in the support and presence of Peter in the church.¹⁹

The affirmation of Peter's active presence in his successors had significant practical consequences for regular believers. Leo considered himself not merely the heir "of so great a shepherd" as the Apostle Peter but viewed himself actually

¹⁰*Serm.* 51.1.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Serm.* 3.3.

¹³*Serm.* 3.4.

¹⁴*Serm.* 3.2.

¹⁵*Serm.* 3.3, 5.4, 12.4, 16.6, 17.4, 18.3. See also Wojtowycsch, *Papsttum und Konzile von den Anfängen bis zu Leo I. (440-461)*, 305.

¹⁶*Serm.* 3.3.

¹⁷*Serm.* 3.4, 4.4. See also Wojtowycsch, *Papsttum und Konzile von den Anfängen bis zu Leo I. (440-461)*, 304.

¹⁸*Serm.* 3.4.

¹⁹*Serm.* 2.2.

as “a Peter” so that the believers would accept St. Peter in his unworthy successor Leo. Viewing himself as standing “at the helm of the Church” for the purpose of building it up, Leo was glad the believers showed loyalty, well-ordered love, and affection to him as Peter’s successor since Christ himself established the episcopal institution.²⁰ When they celebrated the anniversary of Leo’s consecration as pope, they, in his view, actually “met together” in Peter’s honor.²¹ Leo assigned the individual sitting on the see of the bishop of Rome even direct inspiration by Peter.²²

Further, he employed legal terminology to consolidate the connection between the Roman bishops and the Apostle Peter. Thus, he argued, they were *consortibus honoris sui* (partakers of his [Peter’s] honor) as Peter’s *indignatis* (honor) is not absent in his *indigno haeredis* (unworthy heir).²³ Several scholars note that *consortium* (partaker) and *haeres* (heir) form a close legal connection between the pope and Peter as these terms have to be understood in the context of Roman law.²⁴ The heir entered into the rights and responsibilities of the ancestor for the latter to survive as a legal person. The heir and the testator were identical insofar that only the physical bearer of the legal title changed. Hence Leo seemed to suggest the pope obtained all rights and powers of the Apostle Peter, although his successor would always remain unworthy of the office which as an institution was strongly exalted beyond its individual owner.²⁵ By referring to himself as Peter’s *vice fungimur* (substitute), Leo created another legal conception of the connection between Peter and his successors.²⁶ It should nevertheless be noted that he did not originate that idea because the Roman legate Philipp suggested already at the Council of Ephesus in A. D. 431 that Peter was living and judging in his successors.²⁷

²⁰Ibid.

²¹*Serm.* 2.2, 3.4. See also Wojtowysch, *Papsttum und Konzile von den Anfängen bis zu Leo I. (440-461)*, 304.

²²*Ep.* 10.9.

²³*Serm.* 2.2, 3.4.

²⁴Kurt-Dietrich Schmidt, “Papa Petrus ipse,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 54 (1935): 273, 274; Walter Ullmann, “Leo I and the Theme of Papal Primacy,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 11 (1960): 25-51. Michele Maccarone, “La dottrina del primato papale dal IV all’VIII secolo nelle relazioni con le chiese occidentali,” in *Le chiese nei regni dell’ Europa occidentale e i loro rapporti con Roma sino all’ 800*, Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di studi sull’ alto medioevo VII (Spoleto: Presso la Sede del Centro, 1960), 2:670-675, shows the additional connection between the terms *successor* and *haeres*.

²⁵Wojtowysch, *Papsttum und Konzile von den Anfängen bis zu Leo I. (440-461)*, 305.

²⁶*Serm.* 3.4.

²⁷Ullmann, “Leo I and the Theme of Papal Primacy,” 34; Maccarone, “La dottrina del primato papale dal IV all’VIII secolo nelle relazioni con le chiese occidentali,” 678-685;

The tendency to concentrate all ecclesiastical power upon Peter reached a culmination in Leo's rhetoric. His interpretation of the above passages from the Gospel of Matthew are foundational for this rhetoric. The following quotation is exemplary for his argument.

"And I," he said, "tell you," that is to say, just as my Father has manifested my divinity to you, so I make known to you your own prominence. "That you are Peter," that is to say, although I am the indestructible rock, I "the cornerstone who make both things one," I "the foundation on which no one can lay another," you also are rock because you are made firm in my strength. What belongs properly to my own power you share with me by participation.²⁸

The same argument is repeated by Leo in another place, "He [Jesus] wished him [Peter] who had been received into partnership in His undivided unity to be named what He Himself was, when He said: 'Thou art Peter . . .'"²⁹ Wojtowytch observes that Leo's view of Christ sharing his divine power with the "first of the apostles" was new and stressed that there was no equality among the twelve.³⁰ Further, Leo suggested that as Peter "unfailingly maintains that fellowship which he has with the eternal Priest [Christ]," he was substantially distinguished from the other apostles and bishops because he was in a position similar or equal to Christ.³¹

Peter as Mediator of all Ecclesiastical Authority

The second point repeatedly promoted in various ways by Leo were the ideas that God shared his power with Peter and it was only through this apostolic mediator that others could receive authority from God.³² As a result, Peter was in every way the mediator between Christ and the apostles because no power was directly bestowed by the Lord apart from the one given through Peter's hands. In interpreting Luke 22:31, 32, Leo expressed the same thought in a different way.

Wojtowytch, *Papsttum und Konzile von den Anfängen bis zu Leo I. (440-461)*, 305, 306; Adrian Fortescue, *The Early Papacy: to the Synod of Chalcedon in 451*, edited by Scott M. P. Reid, 3rd ed. (Southampton: Saint Austin Press, 1997), 50.

²⁸*Serm.* 4.2; Leo the Great, *St. Leo the Great: Sermons*, transl. Jane Patricia Freeland and Agnes Josephine Conway, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 93 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 27.

²⁹*Ep.* 10.1.

³⁰Wojtowytch, *Papsttum und Konzile von den Anfängen bis zu Leo I. (440-461)*, 306.

³¹*Serm.* 5.5.

³²*Serm.* 4.2. See also Hans Martin Klinkenberg, "Papsttum und Reichskirche bei Leo dem Großen," *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte, Kanonistische Abteilung* 38 (1952): 42-44.

Each apostle encountered the same danger through temptation from fear. All equally needed the help of divine protection, since the devil wanted to harass them all and to crush them all. Still, the Lord took special care of Peter and prayed especially for Peter. It was as if the condition of the others would be more secure if the mind of their leader were not overcome. In Peter, therefore, the fortitude of all is reinforced, for the aid of divine grace is ordered in such a way that the firmness given to Peter through Christ is conferred upon the apostles through Peter.³³

Since Peter alone was the mainstay of the church's faith, the idea of a plurality of equally original traditions of truth was well-nigh impossible. The true faith could therefore be found only in one tradition. By definition every other tradition had to draw its purity and genuineness from his tradition. Peter was literally the rock on whom everything was built, and on his stability everything depended. Leo viewed Peter as the exclusive center of all ecclesiastical power. Other competitive authorities were evidently impossible and totally excluded. This reasoning provided the rationale for his claim that the gospel commission reached the apostles only through Peter.³⁴

According to God's will, the proclamation of the truth for the salvation of all men was supposed to be the concern of all apostles. Hence, Leo stated, "He has placed the principal charge on the blessed Peter, chief of all the Apostles: and from him as from the Head wishes His gifts to flow to all the body: so that anyone who dares to secede from Peter's solid rock may understand that he has no part or lot in the divine mystery."³⁵ He acknowledged Matt 28:19, 20 obviously taught that Christ gave the gospel commission to all apostles, yet Leo focused more on the scene in which Christ distinguished Peter from the other apostles and honored him, interpreting everything else from that center. In fact, he concluded the gospel commission must have been issued to Peter in the first place. Leo interpreted Matt 18:18, where Christ conferred the power to bind and loose to all apostles, in a similar way from the context of Peter's supremacy.³⁶

Rome's Supremacy above all Churches

In his emphasis on the supremacy of the bishop of Rome, Leo the Great referred to another aspect—the supremacy of Rome above all churches. The idea of Rome's superiority was not a new one but in Leo's rhetoric it gained a new dimension. The present section describes the status of Rome at the beginning of the 5th century and Leo's rhetoric to utilize the city's heritage to bolster the status of its bishop.

³³*Serm.* 4.3.

³⁴Wojtowitsch, *Papsttum und Konzile von den Anfängen bis zu Leo I. (440-461)*, 307.

³⁵*Ep.* 10.1.

³⁶*Serm.* 4.3.

By the end of the fourth century there were five patriarchies, four of which were in the East—Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Constantinople—and one was in the West—Rome. In A.D. 325, the sixth canon of Nicaea declared Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch as the three primary sees, being one level above the metropolitans. The patriarchy of Constantinople emerged later due to the late establishment of the city, yet, in A.D. 381, the Council of Constantinople declared that it, as the “new Rome,” possessed ecclesiastical primacy based on its being the capital of the Roman Empire. The old Rome regarded that claim as a violation of the “apostolic principle,” referring to the apostolic foundation of its church and patriarchy.³⁷ Rome still occupied a supreme place in the educated imagination of its citizens even though the city itself played only a relatively unimportant part in the political and economic life of the empire. Distinguishing himself as the head of the local aristocracy especially in times of distress, the bishop of Rome had already assumed the role of the supreme municipal representative and authority of the city.³⁸ Thus, in the A.D. 430s and 440s, the Roman bishops worked in “close alliance with the recently Christianized urban aristocracy, announced their adoption of a classical tradition within the city, and together they staked out a Christian, papal area in it, well removed from the ancient civic centre, still heavy with memories of the unexorcised pagan past.”³⁹ The bishops saw the possibilities to turn the city into the head and center of the Christian world so that the ancient capital could be renewed by its two dead apostles and be re-born as a Christian Rome.⁴⁰

³⁷Ivor J. Davidson, *A Public Faith: From Constantine to the Medieval World, A.D. 312-600*, Baker History of the Church, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 217, 218; Ludwig Freiherr von Hertling, *Communio: Church and Papacy in Early Christianity* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1972), 65; John Meyendorff, “Justinian, the Empire and the Church,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 22 (1968): 49.

³⁸R. A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 125, 126.

³⁹Richard Krautheimer, “The Architecture of Sixtus III: A Fifth Century Renaissance,” in *De Artibus Opuscula XL: Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 291-302; idem, *Three Christian Capitals: Topography and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 104-121.

⁴⁰Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, 126; Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz, “Puer exoriens: On the Hypapante mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore,” in *Perennitas: Beiträge zur christlichen Archäologie und Kunst, zur Geschichte der Literatur, der Liturgie und des Mönchtums sowie zur Philosophie des Rechts und zur politischen Philosophie*, P. Thomas Michels zum 70. Geburtstag, ed. Hugo Rahner, and Emmanuel von Severus, Beiträge zur Geschichte des alten Mönchtums und des Benediktinerordens, Supplement (Münster: Aschendorff, 1963), 118-135; John M. Huskinson, *Concordia Apostolorum: Christian Propaganda at Rome in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries*, British Archaeological Reports International Series, vol. 148 (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1982).

These changes of circumstances and influence created “the conditions for pope [sic] Leo to give moral and religious content to the ideology of Rome’s Christian renewal.”⁴¹ It was his goal to turn Rome into a totally new Christian civic community. This becomes very clear in Leo’s *Ep.* 82.1 in which he declared the people of Rome as

holy people, an elect nation, a priestly and royal city, become, through the see of Peter established here, the head of the world; ruling more widely now through the divine religion than it ever did by worldly dominion. Though enlarged by many victories, you have spread the authority of your rule over land and sea. What your warlike labours have obtained for you is less than what the Christian peace has brought you.⁴²

Since Leo considered the Petrine power as fundamental, he portrayed the supremacy of Rome above all churches in a new light and understood all episcopal activities as part of the exercise of Roman authority. Hence, only the Petrine-Roman activities guaranteed everything would eventually be on the right track. The following statements show the foundation of the monarchical authority of the bishop of Rome.

Every single pastor guides his flock with a special responsibility, knowing that he will have to “render an account” for the sheep entrusted to him. We, on the other hand, have a joint responsibility with all of them. No one’s ministry falls outside the scope of our work.⁴³

Therefore, this privilege of Peter resides wherever judgment has been passed in accordance with his fairness. There cannot be too much severity or too much lenience where nothing is bound or loosed outside of that which blessed Peter has loosed or bound.⁴⁴

A couple incidences illustrate the impact of that reasoning in his dealings with secular authorities. For example, Leo sent a letter to the emperor, asking him to support Proterius, the uncanonically consecrated bishop of Alexandria in A.D. 453, with the necessary military power against heretics and to “use his authority to order the appropriate readings in Alexandria, so that no one would think that Proterius had introduced anything new into orthodox theology.”⁴⁵ There were other instances where Leo asked the emperor to take disciplinary measures against

⁴¹Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, 126.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 126, 127.

⁴³*Serm.* 5.2. Cf. *Ep.* 16.1. See also Wojtowysch, *Papsttum und Konzile von den Anfängen bis zu Leo I. (440-461)*, 310-318, 328-350, on Leo’s activities and influences at different synods and councils, as well as his exercise of authority and influence on the emperors, etc.

⁴⁴*Serm.* 4.3. Cf. *Ep.* 1.2.

⁴⁵Timothy E. Gregory, *Vox Populi: Popular Opinion and Violence in the Religious Controversies of the Fifth Century A.D.* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979), 188.

clergy making up the bishops' neglect.⁴⁶ Dvornik notes that the process of the synods and meetings "gradually" changed from the way they had been outlined in the letters of Cyprian of Carthage as being held in North Africa to the structure of "the meetings of the Roman senate."⁴⁷ Another time, Leo expressed satisfaction at Marcian's edict and a letter of Pulcheria against some monks because the emperors showed "the sublimity of their royal greatness and their sacerdotal holiness." He even numbered Emperor Leo I among "the preachers of Christ" and exhorted him to firmly put down and repel "those who denounced the Christian name." He suggested the royal power was bestowed on him first and foremost to protect the Church, and not only to rule the world.⁴⁸ The bishops of Arles addressed Leo stating that "through blessed Peter, the prince of the apostles, the most holy Roman Church should hold sovereignty over all the Churches of the whole World."⁴⁹

The above examples illustrate Leo's claim to absolute authority above both secular rulers and the other patriarchies although it should be noted that it was difficult to enforce that claim in every place as some ecclesiastical authorities failed to share his aspirations. A point in case is the application of the "apostolic principle" which, at least theoretically, granted the city and the patriarchy of Rome unique primacy before the other patriarchies. While it was more or less respected in the West, it is noteworthy that all other patriarchies were located in the East.

Leo and his successors insisted on the application of the so called "apostolic" principle in support of their precedence before the other sees.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, in A.D. 451, the twenty-eighth canon of Chalcedon reaffirmed the decision of A.D. 381 that Constantinople as the "new Rome" possessed ecclesiastical primacy specifying further that its bishop "had direct jurisdiction over the major metropolitan dioceses of Pontus, Asia, and Trace, and over the churches outside the empire that were associated with them." Leo's delegates protested pointing to the decision of Nicaea. That the authority of Rome should depend upon "secular political prestige rather than upon the eminence of an apostolic foundation" was quite unacceptable to Leo. Until A.D. 453 he refused to sign the doctrinal statement of Chalcedon, protested against the twenty-eighth canon, and annulled it although Marcian had officially declared the decisions of the council to be law.

⁴⁶Francis Dvornik, "Emperors, Popes, and General Councils," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 6 (1951): 17.

⁴⁷Ibid., 4.

⁴⁸Ibid., 16.

⁴⁹Fortescue, *The Early Papacy*, 50.

⁵⁰John Meyendorff, "Justinian, the Empire and the Church," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 22 (1968): 49.

Although Leo did not have problems with the theology of the statement, his resistance to ratify it was based on the elevation of Constantinople.⁵¹

The Power to Lead and Command

The bishops of Rome in the late fourth century considered themselves the direct successors of the Apostle Peter, yet Leo the Great emphasized his control and rule over the entire Christian church as he thought that Peter had been granted absolute universal power over both the religious and the secular realm.

Pope Damasus (A.D. 366-384), for example, referred to Rome already as the *sedes apostolica* (the apostolic see), arguing the approbation of the bishop of Rome was necessary to validate or annul the decisions of the councils. Siricius (A.D. 384-399) was the first pope who issued *epistolae decretales* (decretals) to bishops outside of Italy. These epistles contained not only common advice but they included decrees claiming the same legal force as decrees of the emperor.⁵² Innocent I (A.D. 402-417) commissioned bishops who were to be responsible for certain provinces in the name of the Roman bishop because he wanted to achieve the order and unity of the church under a Roman leadership.⁵³ When the famous John Chrysostom was dismissed from Constantinople's court, Innocent asked for his reinstatement, an effort for which Chrysostom thanked his fellow bishop.⁵⁴ Innocent entertained also contact with the bishop of Antioch which he would have liked to see as his vicar in the east.⁵⁵

Already before Nicaea (A.D. 325), and increasingly afterwards, the procedures of ecclesiastical meetings followed the senatorial model. Besides other similarities, both popes and legates claimed the presidency and exercised the function once claimed and exercised by the *princeps senatus* of the Roman Senate.⁵⁶ The letters of Cyprian of Carthage describe the whole process of synods and local meetings as they were held in North Africa. It is apparent that these meetings "gradually modeled themselves according to the meetings of the Roman senate."⁵⁷ When

⁵¹Davidson, *A Public Faith*, 2:217, 218.

⁵²Karen Piepenbrink, *Antike und Christentum*, Geschichte kompakt (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007), 67.

⁵³Gert Haendler, *Die abendländische Kirche im Zeitalter der Völkerwanderung*, 3rd ed., Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen, vol. I/5 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlags-Anstalt, 1987), 66.

⁵⁴John Chrysostom, 2 *Ep. Innoc.*

⁵⁵Erich Caspar, *Geschichte des Papsttums*, Römische Kirche und Imperium Romanum, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1930), 322.

⁵⁶Francis Dvornik, "Emperors, Popes, and General Councils," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 6 (1951): 18.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 4.

Leo became bishop, it was already common practice for the bishop of Rome to supervise the councils and synods in the West. In the East, this function was occupied by the emperor.⁵⁸

Far more explicit and distinct than his predecessors were Leo's statements regarding the claim that Peter had received the rule and control over the church in a literal sense.⁵⁹ He claimed that Peter alone had been chosen out of the whole world to be in charge of the universal convocation of peoples, every apostle, and all the Fathers of the Church. Although there were many priests and shepherds among God's people, it was Peter who properly rules each one who is completely ruled by Christ.⁶⁰

Leo called Peter the *regimen totius ecclesiae* (guide of the whole church)⁶¹ who had received the *ecclesiae gubernacula* (steering wheel of the church).⁶² He had been appointed by Christ to be *totius ecclesiae principem* (the prince of the whole church),⁶³ using more frequently and intensely the title *principatus*, which had already been used occasionally before, to describe the position of Peter and the Roman bishop.⁶⁴ According to Leo, the primacy of Peter was not debatable: "Yet anyone who holds that the headship must be denied to Peter, cannot really diminish his dignity: but is puffed up with the breath of his pride, and plunges himself into the lowest depth."⁶⁵ It was an offence of the worst kind for someone "not to suffer himself to be subject to the blessed Apostle Peter."⁶⁶ For example, Leo secured an edict from the emperor Valentinian III in which the primacy over the whole occident was affirmed to the See of Peter. A violation of that claim was subject to

⁵⁸Piepenbrink, *Antike und Christentum*, 67. The terms "council" and "synods" were used synonymously in the old church. Whereas today only those councils are considered significant that are generally referred to as ecumenical councils, the fourth and fifth centuries witnessed several other significant councils and synods in western cities such as in Rome (A.D. 313, 375, 382), Arles (A.D. 314, 353, 452), Carthage (A.D. 345-348, 397, 401, 411, 418), Milan (A.D. 355), Rimini (A.D. 359), Paris (A.D. 360-361), Valence (A.D. 374), Saragossa (A.D. 380), Toledo (A.D. 397-400), and Turin (A.D. 398).

⁵⁹Wojtowysch, *Papsttum und Konzile von den Anfängen bis zu Leo I. (440-461)*, 308.

⁶⁰*Serm.* 4.2. The Latin text states, in fact, that Peter was put before (*praeponatur*) all the Fathers of the Church.

⁶¹*Serm.* 62.2.

⁶²*Serm.* 3.3.

⁶³*Serm.* 4.4.

⁶⁴Wojtowysch, *Papsttum und Konzile von den Anfängen bis zu Leo I. (440-461)*, 309.

⁶⁵*Ep.* 10.2. Leo even stated, "In the person of my lowliness he [Peter] is seen, he is honoured, in whom remains the care of all pastors and of the sheep of their charge. His power does not fail, even in an unworthy heir." See Fortescue, *The Early Papacy*, 62.

⁶⁶*Ep.* 10.2. Cf. Wojtowysch, *Papsttum und Konzile von den Anfängen bis zu Leo I. (440-461)*, 309.

legal penalties.⁶⁷ He asked the bishops of North African to submit to his authority.⁶⁸ Leo was further determined to rid the city of Rome of Manichees and other heretics as a part of a whole program of establishing Rome as a *theopolis*.⁶⁹

Leo's picture of the Christian Church is summarized in a letter to his vicar in Thessalonica. When Leo heard Anatolius had been made bishop of Thessalonica, he reminded him that he was the vicar of the bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter, "on the solidity of which foundation the Church is established."⁷⁰

Accordingly, the disciples were all equal in regard to their election by Christ, yet only Peter received the power to lead the rest. In Leo's view, that incident provided the model for the distinction between the bishops at the provincial, metropolitan, and universal level. Nothing should be separated from the head of the church, and everything is given to the care of "Peter's one seat."⁷¹ The strictly structured building of the church had its head in the Roman church, being distinguished from the others by its "distinction of power." Unity existed therefore only if everyone carried his subjection willfully and if nothing departed from the will of the Roman "head." Harmony was thus inseparably connected with the willingness to obey especially the successor of the apostle Peter.⁷²

He suggested that no congregation or union of churches was allowed to rest upon their own authority apart from the successor of Peter. Even the great episcopacies of the East were nothing else than intermediaries that owed loyalty and obedience to the See of Peter.⁷³ Thus when the Syrian theologian and bishop Theodoret was excommunicated at the *Latrocinium* in A.D. 449, Leo decided he should be restored to his see and be admitted as one of the accusers of Dioscorus at Chalcedon resulting in an uproar at the council.⁷⁴ He wanted to enforce his

⁶⁷"*Tunc enim demum ecclesiarum pax ubique servabitur, si rectorem sum agnoscat universitas [ecclesiarum].*" See *Novellae Valent.* 3. tit. 16; Karl Heussi, *Kompendium der Kirchengeschichte*, 16th ed. (1971; reprint, Tübingen: Mohr, 1981), 126; cf. Davidson, *A Public Faith*, 2:321.

⁶⁸Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity (A.D. 311-600)*, 8th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 3:320.

⁶⁹R. A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 127; C. Lepelley, "Saint Léon le Grand et la cité romaine," *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 35 (1962): 137, 147.

⁷⁰*Ep.* 6; cf. Joseph McCabe, *Crisis in the History of the Papacy: A Study of Twenty Famous Popes Whose Careers and Whose Influence Were Important in the Development of the Church and in the History of the World* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916), 41.

⁷¹*Ep.* 14.12.

⁷²Wojtowitsch, *Papsttum und Konzile von den Anfängen bis zu Leo I. (440-461)*, 309.

⁷³Erich Caspar, *Geschichte des Papsttums*, Römische Kirche und Imperium Romanum, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1930), 457.

⁷⁴Patrick T. R. Gray, *The Defense of Chalcedon in the East (451-553)*, ed. Heiko A. Oberman, *Studies in the History of Christian Thought*, vol. 20 (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 8.

claim as the head of the Church even in the “new” Rome. He “kept up a continuous correspondence with a wide range of people in the capital” trying to influence them.⁷⁵ For example, in December 449, he wrote “to the citizens of Constantinople” congratulating them for maintaining the true faith and resisting heresy. When Anatolius as the new bishop of Constantinople took up correspondence with Leo the latter expressed his surprise to Constantinople’s orthodox archimandrites and clerics about the new bishop’s lack of candor. Afterwards, Leo sent a delegation “armed with a collection of appropriate texts from the Fathers” to correct all those who had been led astray. In late A.D. 450 the new empress Pulcheria informed Leo that Anatolius had eventually accepted Leo’s theology and agreed to sign his *Tome*.⁷⁶ Since the Constantinopolitan patriarch was apparently too negligent, Leo asked the emperor in A.D. 457 to “administer to the Church [of Constantinople] even the remedy of removing such men [clerics favorable to heretical tenets] not only from the clerical ranks but from the territory of the city, lest the holy people of God be further infected by the contagion of their perversion.”⁷⁷ In his view, the conception of the church as being based on his doctrine of Peter left no room for autonomous councils because matters of faith and jurisdiction led necessarily and without exception into the *cathedra Petri*.⁷⁸

Conclusion

This article was intended to show new arguments employed by Leo the Great for the authority of the bishop of Rome. Leo built on existing traditions concerning the role of the Apostle Peter as the founder of Rome’s churches and its episcopal succession, the significance of the bishop of Rome by standing in Peter’s succession, and the Western perception of the significance of the city and the patriarchy of Rome based on the “apostolic principle.” It has been shown that Leo emphasized the presence of the Apostle Peter in his successors, Peter’s mediatorship of all ecclesiastical authority, the supremacy of Rome above all Christian churches, and the power of Peter and his successor, the bishop of Rome, to rule the universal Christian church.

First, beginning with Matt 16:16-19, Leo asserted that Peter was the rock and the church was continually reared on Peter’s confession of faith. He argued that through this event Peter had been ordained before the other apostles. Now he was still active and present in the church, being present in his successor and speaking through him. In addition, Leo employed legal terminology to strengthen

⁷⁵*Ep.* 50; *Ep.* 51; Gregory, *Vox Populi*, 151.

⁷⁶Gregory, *Vox Populi*, 151, 163, 167.

⁷⁷Dvornik, “Emperors, Popes, and General Councils,” 16, 17.

⁷⁸Klinkenberg, “Papsttum und Reichskirche bei Leo dem Großen,” 53.

the continuity between Peter and the Roman bishops, to finally affirm that all ecclesiastical power concentrated on him.

Second, Leo emphasized that Peter was the only mediator between Christ and his apostles because Christ had set apart Peter as the mediator of the genuine tradition and of the locus of ecclesiastical power. Likewise, the bishop of Rome as Peter's successor was the source of the true tradition and the foundation for all authority in the church on earth.

Third, in his view, only the Petrine-Roman activities guaranteed that the church would proceed in the right direction. Thus ecclesiastical and imperial ideas converged to form the monarchical foundation of the role and work of the bishop of Rome. While Leo attempted to enforce that authority in all ecclesial and secular matters, his attempts occasionally met resistance as his view of the episcopal power of Peter's successor was not always shared by all bishops or secular rulers, specifically not in the East.

Fourth, while Leo's predecessors considered themselves as Peter's successors who were granted unique authority, he emphasized far more explicitly Peter's absolute rule and control over the universal church. He was the supreme ruler whose authority was not to be questioned. Although all disciples were equally chosen by Christ, only Peter had received the power to lead the rest and became the sole foundation for the worldwide church. Leo stressed that as this incident provided the model for all later ecclesiastical hierarchy, ecclesiastical unity could only come to pass when everyone yielded completely to the will of the bishop of Rome.

This study underlines the significant additions the views of Leo the Great made to the rationale of previous bishops and church leaders regarding the power and authority of the Roman bishop. While he provided the rationale for the absolute and complete universal rule of the Roman episcopacy, it was not until later centuries that this authority could really be enforced by the Papacy.

Future studies could explore the continuity or discontinuity of Leo's rationale in later and present Roman Catholic theology and to what extent they influenced and shaped medieval papal claims to power and their enforcements in both the religious and secular realms.