



Papal Supremacy versus Episcopal Collegiality: Examining the necessity of a centralized authority within the hierarchy of Bishops

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ABSTRACT

Bishops in the Roman Catholic Church are considered successors of the Apostles and serve a central role in the Church's governance and mission. As chief shepherds of their dioceses, they are entrusted with the responsibility of governing, teaching, and sanctifying the faithful. They exercise authority within their dioceses while remaining in communion with the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, who serves as the head of the universal Catholic Church. If every bishop is endowed with the administration of his diocese, can one of them direct another on what to do? In carrying out his functions, the Pope can interfere in the affairs of every diocese. This brings to focus the issue of *primus inter pares* (first among equals). This paper aims to clarify the role of the Pope and that of every bishop to reveal whether or not the Pope duplicates the role of the bishop (Local Ordinary).

Keywords: Roman Catholic Church, Dicastery, Ordinary, Local Ordinary, Local bishop.

INTRODUCTION

The Local Ordinary, or the Bishop of every diocese, is the primary leader and chief shepherd of the faithful in his diocese. He ensures that the faithful are spiritually taken care of and that Church laws are obeyed. Since the Pope is a bishop who performs this same function, though in the Universal Church, some wonder whether the role of the Pope in the administration of ecclesiastical power is a duplication of the role of the local Ordinaries or Bishops in the various dioceses. Mention the name “Roman Catholic Church”, and several people begin to think about the Pope, the curia, or the Church in Rome. For many, the theology of the local church was lost or completely absorbed into the concept of the Universal Church existing in the Papacy alone. This makes it difficult to recognize the local church as a church complete in itself. The Second Vatican Council helped greatly in retrieving the meaning and importance of the local church. Vatican II clarified that there is no such thing as a Church universal that is not also to be found inculturated in the local church, no matter how rich or poor the locality may be (*Lumen Gentium* 26). Because of the balance sought between the local church and the Papacy in the Second Vatican Council, some theologians referred to Vatican II as “the Ecclesiological Council.” Theologians have recognized that the Council concerned itself with the formal

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study of the church. Despite the efforts of the Second Vatican Council, however, what remains to be clearly defined is the primacy of the Pope and that of the local bishops. How limited are the powers of the local bishop? To what extent can the power of the Pope be exercised? Is there a duplication of powers since all the bishops are successors of the apostles? These are the questions that come to mind.

This paper argues that the local church is complete in itself and reveals the reality of the universal church at its location. It will express the irreplaceable role of bishops as affirmed in Vatican II and stress that the role of the Pope is like that of a “sentinel,” watching over the people of God. The work concludes that the role of the Roman primacy is very important and necessary for the unity of the church. Since the Universal Church is acknowledged from the communion of the local churches, we need someone to “coordinate” the affairs of the Church at large, and that is why the bishop of Rome has received the powers he now possesses.

METHODOLOGY

Discussing a topic of this magnitude requires a method that will avoid generalization, and demonstrate a high level of analytical precision. This paper will make use of a multidimensional methodology. Four structured lenses will be used, which will synthesize theological views with the practical reality of the office of the Pope. The methodological areas are: Ecclesiological, Historical, Juridical and Socio-Political. On the front of Ecclesiology, the focus will be on the dogmatic constitution of the Second Vatican Council, to explore how the structures of the Church are defined. The Historical aspect of the methodology will look at contrasting the medieval era of high temporal power and the modern era of the Pope as a universal spiritual leader, and the extent of his territorial sovereignty. The area of discussing the Pope’s full, immediate, and universal authority will be examined using the juridical method, or the lens of Canon Law. Finally, the socio-political lens will be employed to assess the Pope as a kind of power on the global stage. The Pope is expected to make pronouncements and influence decisions about human rights, peace, and secular policies. By synthesizing these dimensions in the methodology, this paper will examine the need for Papal Supremacy within the hierarchy of Bishops.

The Local Church

The local church, which is the Church of God, is seen as the response of human beings to the saving will of God. Until Vatican II, the local church was not given the prominence it deserved. Vatican II has clarified that the local church, which is called a diocese, is a section of God’s people under the care of a bishop who shepherds them with the collaboration of the presbytery or clergy. In the local church, the document states: “God’s people are entrusted to a bishop to be guided by him . . . and formed by him into one community in the holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Eucharist; it constitutes one particular Church in which the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of Christ is truly present and active.”¹ Here, it becomes apparent that the role of the bishop is paramount so far as the local church is concerned. Being the steward of the grace of the supreme priesthood, the bishop offers the Eucharist in and from which the Church derives its life, as well as thrives in this world and prepares for the eschatology. Dennis M. Doyle expresses how Jean Marie Tillard defined the church as understood by the Patristics, who bring out the nature of the Church as communities that are rooted in the Holy Trinity. Tillard writes about the Church as: “Not simply an ethical organization or a band of those who follow Jesus, but is in its very nature a communion” This communion, he continues, consists in communities throughout the world gathered together by the Spirit and rooted in the Trinity. This is truly in ‘its very nature the Body of Christ.’ As such, the nature of the church is connected in an integral way with the Eucharist. It is in the Eucharistic celebration that the church is ‘fully in itself.’”²

The French joint Roman Catholic and Orthodox deliberation on the “Roman Primacy within the Communion of Churches” highlights the local church by illustrating that the Eucharistic body of Christ is the source of this ecclesial body, which also means that the Eucharistic celebration is the “highest

¹ Austin Flannery, “Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents. New Revised Edition” (Dominican Publications Dublin, 1992).

² Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000).

manifestation of the Church. Because this celebration, in which the mystery is present each time in all its fullness, is always the celebration of a local Church, it is a local Church which is truly the presence, in one place, of the one Church of Christ”³ They went further to explain the role of the bishop who has to preside over the Eucharistic celebration. The committee linked the local church to that of the universal by writing:

*All the local Churches gathered together by the Eucharist are, in principle, the full manifestation in each place of the one catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ, but They are not so in isolation nor through an autocratic autonomy that reduces the universal Church to an abstraction.*⁴

Here, the committee wants to underscore the importance of the local church and reminds Catholics that the local Church does not operate in isolation, since it reveals the universal Church, and it is in and of the complex whole called the universal Church. The one who takes care of the Local Church is the Ordinary or the Local bishop. Let us now take a look at who the Ordinary is.

The Local bishop

The bishop of the local church, or the Ordinary, is the primary symbol through whom the universal church is revealed. John Marie Tillard stresses this when he writes that the function of the bishop is “to allow the catholicity of the Church to reveal itself in a particular place and a particular culture, according to its essential dimensions.”⁵ The function of the bishop is revealed horizontally and vertically. Vertical communion in the episcopacy reveals the bishop’s apostolic succession, which the bishop shares in the apostolic succession by virtue of his ordination. This makes him share in the “identity of the church of the Apostles.” Thus, through this function of a bishop, the local church recognizes her features in the apostolic Church. The horizontal communion enables the identification of a local church with all “the other local churches” scattered throughout the world.⁶⁷

Every local bishop, by virtue of his ordination, which is done in the presence of several bishops, participates in the apostolic college. Tillard reveals a controversy that exists between the local bishop and the pope by stating that “the bishop of Rome is not, strictly speaking, the one who creates unity, but the responsibility falls to the bishop as the instrument of the Spirit.”⁸ Through Vatican II, we realize that each bishop is a source and foundation of unity.⁹ The bishop is, therefore, someone who unifies the church, a role which is ascribed to the Pope for the Universal Church.

The confusion with the power or role of the bishop becomes stronger when Vatican II refers to the individual bishop to whom the care of a particular diocese is committed for the flocks under the authority of the Supreme Pontiff, in the name of God, “as the proper, ordinary and immediate pastors sanctifying and governing them...”¹⁰ Here, the primacy of the local bishop is emphatically stated. He has the right to unify the faithful and guide them as a pastor of souls. The local bishop has the “proper”, “ordinary” and “immediate” powers to sanctify and govern the people of God. If the bishop, together with his flock, reveals the Universal Church in their locality, the bishop needs these powers to perform the role of a primate in his diocese. These adjectives, “proper”, “ordinary” and “immediate”, according to Tillard, were used by the First Vatican Council to describe the power of the bishop of Rome over the Christian communities and the faithful.¹¹ It is only the bishop of Rome who is allowed to interfere in a local church, without the limitations that prevent other bishops from crossing over to the territory of another bishop. This is why some scholars,

³ “Ecumenical Notes and Documents” in *One in Christ* 29:2 (1993), 157

⁴ “Ecumenical Notes and Documents,” 157

⁵ Marie J. Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome* (Wilmington: De: Michael Glazier, 1983).

⁶ Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome*, 152.

⁷ Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome*, 152.

⁸ Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome*, 154.

⁹ Flannery, “Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents. New Revised Edition.”

¹⁰ Flannery, “Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents. New Revised Edition.”

¹¹ Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome*, 128.

such as Cardinal Walter Kasper, wanted to institute a debate where there will be a clear definition of the powers of the bishop of Rome, since they do not favor the idea that the bishop of Rome can override the local bishop.

In reaction to a letter sent by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF),¹² Kasper invites all bishops to speak up and not to sit idle when they face an “awkward dilemma.” He explains that the task of the local bishop is to be a bond of unity between the See of Rome and his people. He sees the bishop as being pulled in “two directions.” The one who finds himself as a “member of the universal Episcopal college in solidarity with the pope and his brother bishops”. This, he continues, calls for the protection of the unity of the Catholic Church by all bishops. On the other hand, “he is the shepherd of a local church,” charged with the responsibility of his own people. He has to provide and respond to their expectations and answer their questions.¹³

Kasper’s concern is that it is difficult for bishops to bring these two groups together. If any bishop tries to apply “general norms” as is expected by the Roman superiors, “his effort is likely to be useless,” and if he does not enforce the norms, he is judged “disobedient”. He suggests a possible solution in his article, which is “the bishop must have enough vital space to make responsible decisions in the matter of implementing universal laws”. He identifies this within the church’s tradition and does not see why it should not be practiced.¹⁴ Kasper reminds Ratzinger and his office (DDF) that the local church is not “a province nor a department of the Universal Church; it is a church at a given place” and that the local bishop is not a delegate of the pope but one sent by Jesus Christ who receives “the fullness of power through his sacramental consecration - the power that he needs to govern his diocese.” According to Kasper, this is what the Second Vatican Council teaches.

Kasper also decries the centralization that has entered into the church instead of the decentralization that Vatican II intended.¹⁵ He further argues that from the beginning of the church, it has been the practice that a broad range of principles and rules have been developed for a flexible and responsible adaptation of universal regulations to particular and concrete situations. He also praised the fact that the universal church values the cardinal virtue of prudence when warranted under special circumstances, permitting exceptions to general norms. He does not understand why the church could allow the local bishop the right to suspend a new law temporarily if the bishop judges that law to be harmful in his territory, and still limit the powers of the local bishop and increase those of the Pope. One can state that Kasper is right and fair in his analysis of the Pope having too much power to interfere in the local church. However, one needs to examine critically the reason why the church puts such a mechanism in place before one concludes that there is too much centralization in terms of the powers of the Pope.

In defining the role of the local bishop, Kasper mentions that the bishop finds himself “a member of the universal Episcopal college in solidarity with the Pope and his brother bishops.” Kasper specifically stresses the role of the Episcopal colleges as one “in solidarity with the Pope.” This can be interpreted as centralization, but it is for administrative reasons. Interfering in a local church is nothing new. The only problem that some people, including Kasper, have is the absolute power that has been given to the See of Peter (Pope). If it is a matter of interference alone that worries Kasper, then he has not much of a problem because he is content with the concept of the Metropolitan, to whom, according to the Code of Canon Law, is given a special function and power, to be determined in a particular law. He is charged to make sure that the faith and ecclesiastical discipline are carefully observed and to notify the Roman Pontiff if there is any abuse.¹⁶ This allows the Metropolitan to interfere in another local church in his province, even though the power given to the Metropolitan is limited. In this case, the bishops allow and accept a degree of

¹² Then the Congregation for the Defense of the Faith (CDF). The name was changed in 2022 to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF).

¹³ Walter Kasper, “A Friendly Reply to Cardinal Ratzinger on the Church,” *America* 184, no. 14 (2001): 8–14.

¹⁴ Kasper, “A Friendly Reply to Cardinal Ratzinger on the Church.”

¹⁵ Kasper, “A Friendly Reply to Cardinal Ratzinger on the Church.”

¹⁶ Canon Law Society, *The Code of Canon Law*, ed. Collins William B. (London: Eerdmans Publication Company., 1983).

interference. Even there, the Roman Pontiff has to be notified. All this is to ensure that there is someone who has a broader perspective to look at issues with the universal church in mind.

Reasons for the Roman Primacy

According to Ratzinger, the church of Rome is a local church and not the universal church. It is a “local church with a peculiar universal responsibility; still it remains a local church.”¹⁷ Ratzinger is right to remind us of the role of the Pope. It is because of this peculiar universal responsibility of the occupant of the See of Peter that the Pope is given the power he needs to discharge his duties effectively. One can agree with this concept defended by Ratzinger. The decree on the pastoral office of the bishop in the church (*Christus Dominus*) in Vatican II spells out the role of the Roman Pontiff. It states:

*In this church of Christ, the Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter, to whom Christ entrusted the care of his sheep and lambs, has been granted by God supreme, full, immediate and universal power in the care of souls. As pastor of all the faithful, his mission is to promote the common good of the universal and the particular good of all the churches. He is therefore endowed with the primacy of ordinary power over all the churches.*¹⁸

The decree continues to express that the bishops of the other local churches “have been designated by the Holy Spirit” to take the apostles’ place as pastors of souls and, together with the “Supreme Pontiff and subject to his authority,” they are to “perpetuate” the work of Jesus Christ who is the “eternal pastor.”¹⁹ This quotation has only one purpose, and that is unity in the church. Ray Stephen demonstrates that Peter became the first among the closest associates of Jesus to reiterate Peter’s primacy. He demonstrates this by tracing the historical development of the background of Peter in Rome and his martyrdom, which shows that the early Christians had a clear understanding of the primacy of Peter in the see of Rome.²⁰

Of course, one will argue that the unity of the church is recognized in all the bishops in their local church. This is true, but it should be noted that the local church represents the universal church, but it does not exhaust the universal church. Therefore, there is a need to have someone who unifies or coordinates the role of the unifiers. This is why the pope receives “full”, “immediate”, and “universal” power in the care of souls. Joe Heschmeyer leads us to understand what Jesus means by establishing the primacy of Peter, in the style of servant leadership, at the Last Supper. Peter should be seen as the “Servant of the Servants of God.”²¹ Again, one will be tempted to argue that the Pope is usurping the powers of the local bishops, but the fact of the matter is that there is a need for someone who is called for the *koinonia* of the universal church. This, according to Tillard, provides support for the churches in “their confession of the true apostolic faith” and ensures the respect and privileges that are proper to each of the churches.²² Tillard wrote this when he was assessing the role that Pope Leo the Great played in the church. John J. Norwich draws our attention to the fact that the role of the Pope is the best thing that ever happened to the institutional Church, when he states that the Papacy is: “Perhaps the most astonishing social, political, and spiritual institution ever created.”²³ The Catholic Church must therefore see the role of the Pope as beneficial to the Church for the continuation of the work of Jesus and the Apostles.

Doyle stresses the necessity of the Roman primacy when he writes that the church is “founded on the apostles, not on a super-apostle” and goes further to express that the Pope does not exercise “dominion” but “power” and compares his role to that of a choir director rather than a general in the army.²⁴

¹⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, “The Local Church and The Universal Church,” *America* 185, no. 16 (2001): 7–10.

¹⁸ Flannery, “Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents. New Revised Edition.”

¹⁹ Flannery, “Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents. New Revised Edition.”

²⁰ Stephen K Ray, *Upon This Rock: St. Peter and the Primacy of Rome in Scripture and the Early Church* (Ignatius Press, 2009).

²¹ Joe Heschmeyer, *Pope Peter: Defending the Church’s Most Distinctive Doctrine in a Time of Crisis* (Catholic Answers, Incorporated, 2020).

²² Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome*, 123.

²³ John J. Norwich, *The Pope: A History* (NY: Vintage Publishing, 2012), xvii–xix.

²⁴ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 156.

This way of expressing the power of the Pope helps to understand his role and the necessity of his office. The role of the choir director is to ensure harmony. The Pope is not to dominate. Whenever he interferes, he does so for the well-being of God's faithful; he is a director and not an army general. The Pope is someone who watches out for the sake of the unity of the church and to promote the communion that the church stands for.

Doyle goes on to quote Tillard, expressing how the function of the pope is for unity and serves the deposit of faith. He observes: "that only in the Roman Church is communion in its fullness; and that the role of the Roman Church is providentially willed by God." Doyle further writes that the papacy is a gift and service to the church, and it is also a sign of unity.²⁵

Touching on the aspect of the unity of the papacy, John Zizioulas writes that the "papacy, properly understood and carried out, could function as an important service of unity."²⁶ He made this assertion when he was explaining the patristic vision of communion ecclesiology. In highlighting the necessity of the Episcopal connection to local churches, Doyle writes, "Afanasieve's fault, in Zizioulas' eyes, was that he focused on the fullness of the local church, but the way he did so, Afanasieve stressed the self-sufficiency of the local church at the expense of the importance of larger connections with other churches . . ."²⁷ From this discussion, it can be asserted that there is a need for a pivotal point for the churches which will help to recognize its unity. According to Doyle, Catholics maintain that the papacy is critical not only within their tradition, but with regard to ecumenical matters as well.

It can be appreciated that when one examines the role of bishops and their powers and compares it to the Pope and his powers, one is tempted to think that the bishops are just "vicars" of the Pope. The bishops, together with the Pope, create unity. Tillard expresses this idea by twisting it a little, but brings home the necessity of the powers of the bishop of Rome. He writes: "The bishop of Rome is not, strictly speaking, he who creates unity. That responsibility falls to the local bishop as the instrument of the Spirit. The 'primate' has the task of 'watching' over the unity so that the faith on which it is built remains one with the apostolic faith."²⁸ The whole idea of *Centrum Unitatis* is shared by all the bishops because they unify their local churches. However, the church still needs someone to watch over this unity, and this makes the Roman primacy a necessity for the Roman Catholic Church. For instance, in October 2013, Pope Francis, in exercising his role as the one who watches over the others, suspended a German bishop, Franz-Peter Tebartz-Van, who was accused of lavish spending on himself. He spent 31 million Euros (\$43million) of the Church fund on the renovation of his residence.²⁹³⁰ It takes one who functions as the "watchman" or choir director to address such situations.

Let us draw on the French joint Roman Catholic and Orthodox Committee to express the fact that the reasons why one or the other is seen as possessing a primatial function vary. They are known to be theological, ecclesiastical, political, and cultural. All of these help in maintaining the unity of the church. They reveal that whatever may be said about the primatial function involves the episcopacy itself. They write:

*The more particular ministry of universal communion is nothing else than the particular exercise of a solicitude for the Churches and the promotion of communion in the Churches, which as such belong to the Episcopal function, and which every bishop is expected to exercise personally.*³¹

This is a true statement about the episcopacy, and every bishop is supposed to exercise his universal authority. The question then becomes, how does a bishop exercise his universal authority without being

²⁵ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 157.

²⁶ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 157.

²⁷ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 163.

²⁸ Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome*, 154.

²⁹ Alison Smale, *Vatican Suspends German Bishop Accused of Lavish Spending on Himself* (New York: New York Times, 2013).

³⁰ Alison Smale, "Vatican Suspends German Bishop Accused of Lavish Spending on Himself." (New York: New York Times, www.nytimes.com. 2013. Accessed 07/01/25

³¹ "Ecumenical Notes and Documents" in *One in Christ* 29:2 (1993), 159

accused of interfering? They exercise their universal authority through three distinguished functions, namely Ecumenical Council, Collegiality and Ordination of bishops.

The committee further expresses that the task of the bishops is to demonstrate that the one and holy Church may be really present in the local Church, and that the communion of churches be built up as a communion of local Churches. There must be interdependence between the one who is considered the “first” and the other bishops. In my estimation, the committee gives a grand guideline by stating:

*Bishops of every nation ought to know the one who, among them, is first and to consider him as their head, and do nothing of an extraordinary nature without his advice. Each of them should do only what is required in his diocese and in the territories dependent on him. Likewise, the first should not do anything without the advice of all the others.*³²

This is what the Roman Catholic Church practices. The problem is that the “first” does not listen to the advice of all before he embarks on a project. What he does is consult with the curia, which can be said to be a representation of the “all” that is required to offer advice. This is because God uses whoever is the Pope to bring about a visible, structured institution here on earth, in spite of the limitations of one who occupies the seat of the Pope.³³

CONCLUSION

It has to be acknowledged that the local Church, according to Vatican II, is complete in itself and does reveal the universal church at its location. The bishop of the local church is the primary symbol through which the universal Church is revealed and unified. There is a need, however, for a unifier of the unifiers, and that is the function of the Pope. Rather than being seen as having "absolute power," the Pope should be a unifier for the sake of communion, and he should respect the unifying role of the bishops as successors of the apostles by conferring with them concerning major matters within the Church. The Pope is seen as a choir master in his role. The choir master ensures a harmonious melody. He acts to maintain and produce a good melody for the universal Church. This role must be distinguished from that of a general in the military, whose duty is to order his subordinates to execute a mission. The general orders and waits to be informed that the mission has been successful. As a result of the divinely founded and sustained nature of his office, the Pope ensures that, despite cultural and historical challenges and his own imperfections, the Church produces a harmonious symphony of faith and moral rectitude in the world. Hence the universal primacy is not a duplication of the local primacy, but a necessity.

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³² “Ecumenical Notes and Documents” in *One in Christ*, 159.

³³ Heschmeyer, *Pope Peter: Defending the Church’s Most Distinctive Doctrine in a Time of Crisis*.

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