

Retrieving the Tradition

THE PRIMACY OF THE POPE
AND THE UNITY OF
THE PEOPLE OF GOD¹

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“The strength in which the Vicar of Christ must come to resemble his Lord is the strength of love that is ready for martyrdom.”



I. THE SPIRITUAL BASIS FOR PRIMACY
AND COLLEGIALITY

The papacy is not one of the popular topics of the post-conciliar period. To a certain extent it was something self-evident as long as the monarchy corresponded to it in the political realm. Ever since the monarchic idea became extinct in practice and was replaced by the democratic idea, the doctrine of papal primacy has lacked a point of reference within the scope of our common intellectual assumptions. So it is certainly no accident that the First Vatican Council was dominated by the idea of primacy,

1. This text is an excerpt from the book *Fundamental Speeches from Five Decades*, ed. Florian Schuller, trans. Michael J. Miller, J. R. Foster, and Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 13–33. Reprinted with kind permission.

while the Second was characterized mainly by the struggle over the concept of collegiality.² Of course, we should immediately add that, in adopting the idea of collegiality (along with other initiatives from contemporary life), the Second Vatican Council sought to describe it in such a way that the idea of primacy was contained within it. Today, now that we have gained a little experience with collegiality, its value and also its limitations, it looks as though we have to start again precisely at this place in order to understand better how these seemingly contrary traditions belong together and thus to preserve the richness of the Christian reality.

1. Collegiality as the expression of the “we” structure of the faith

In connection with the conciliar debate, theology had tried, in due course, to understand collegiality as something more than a merely structural or functional feature: as a fundamental law that extends into the innermost essential foundations of Christianity and that therefore appears in various ways on the individual levels of Christianity as it is actually put into practice. It was possible to demonstrate that the “we” structure was part of Christianity in the first place.³ The believer, as such, never stands alone: to become a believer means to emerge from isolation into the “we” of the children of God; the act of turning to the God revealed in Christ is always a turning also to those who have already been called. The theological act as such is always an ecclesial act, which also has a characteristically social structure.⁴

2. H. J. Pottmeyer sheds light on the intellectual-historical context in which the First Vatican Council should be viewed; see his book *Unfehlbarkeit und Souveränität: Die päpstliche Unfehlbarkeit im System der ultramontanen Ekklesiologie des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Tübinger theologische Studien 5 (Mainz, 1975).

3. I tried in 1965 to set forth the spiritual background for collegiality in the “we” structure of Christianity in my essay for *Concilium* (English ed., vol. 1, no. 1 [January 1965]: 20–34), “The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality,” which was reprinted in the original German in J. Ratzinger, *Das neue Volk Gottes* (Düsseldorf, 1969), 201–24. A thoroughgoing treatment of the problem is the important book by H. Mühlen, *Una mystica persona: Die Kirche als Mysterium der Identität des Heiligen Geistes in Christus und der Kirche: Eine Person in vielen Personen*, 3rd ed. (Paderborn, 1968).

4. Henri de Lubac explained this strikingly in his book *Catholicisme*, which

Hence initiation into Christianity has always been socialization into the community of believers as well, becoming “we,” which surpasses the mere “I.”⁵ Accordingly, Jesus called his disciples to form the Twelve, which recalls the number of tribes in the ancient People of God, an essential feature of which, in turn, is the fact that God creates a communal history and deals with his people as a people.⁶ On the other hand, the most profound reason for this “we” character of Christianity proved to be the fact that God himself is a “we”: the God professed in the Christian Creed is not a lonely self-reflection of thought or an absolutely and indivisibly self-contained “I,” but rather he is unity in the trinitarian relation of I-you-we, so that being “we,” as the fundamental form of divinity, precedes all worldly instances of “we,” and the image and likeness of God necessarily refers to such being “we” from the very beginning.⁷

In this connection, a treatise by E. Peterson on “Monotheism as a Political Problem,” which had been largely forgotten, again became a matter of current interest. In it, Peterson tried to show that Arianism was a political theology favored by

first appeared in 1938 [translated by Lancelot C. Sheppard and Elizabeth Englund as *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988)]. See also the dissertation written by H. Schnackers as a doctoral student at the University of Regensburg: *Kirche als Sakrament und Mutter* (1976). In Germany, this same approach was developed particularly in the studies of H. Poschmann on the theology of the sacrament of reconciliation, especially *Poenitentia secunda* (Bonn, 1940); it was impressively continued by K. Rahner—for example, in his essay “Forgotten Truths Concerning the Sacrament of Penance,” *Theological Investigations* (London and Baltimore, 1963), 2:135–74.

5. Initiation as ecclesial socialization is very strongly emphasized in the section entitled “Eingliederung in die Kirche,” in the book *Pastorale: Handreichung für den pastoralen Dienst*, by G. Biemer, J. Müller, and R. Zerfaß (Mainz, 1972).

6. On the significance of the Twelve, see, for example, R. Schnackenburg, *The Church in the New Testament*, trans. W. J. O’Hara (London, 1965), 22–35; on the conciliar application of the theme, see G. Philips, *L’Église et son mystère au II^e concile du Vatican*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1967), 277–90 and 230–45.

7. Cf. Henri de Lubac, *The Christian Faith: An Essay on the Structure of the Apostles’ Creed*, trans. Richard Arnandez (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 55–84; Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004); Mühlen, *Una mystica persona*.

the emperors because it ensured a divine analogy to the political monarchy, whereas the triumph of the trinitarian faith exploded political theology and removed the theological justification for political monarchy.⁸ Peterson interrupted his presentation at this point; now it was taken up again and continued with a new analogous thought, the basic thrust of which was: God's "we" must be the model for the action of the Church as a "we." This general approach, which can be interpreted in various ways, was in a few cases taken so far as to claim that, accordingly, the exercise of the primacy by a single man, the pope in Rome, actually follows an Arian model. In keeping with the three Persons in God, the argument went, the Church must also be led by a college of three, and the members of this triumvirate, acting together, would be the pope. There was no lack of ingenious speculations that (alluding, for instance, to Soloviev's story about the Antichrist) discovered that in this way a Roman Catholic, an Orthodox, and a Protestant together could form the papal troika. Thus it appeared that the ultimate formula for ecumenism had been found, derived immediately from theology (from the concept of God), that they had discovered a way to square the circle, whereby the papacy, the chief stumbling block for non-Catholic Christianity, would have to become the definitive vehicle for bringing about the unity of all Christians.⁹

2. *The interior basis for the primacy: Faith as responsible personal witness*

Is this, then—the reconciliation of collegiality and primacy—the answer to the question posed by our subject: the primacy of the pope and the unity of the People of God? Although we need

8. Reprinted in E. Peterson, *Theologische Traktate* (Munich, 1951), 45–147; first published in 1935. The set of historical problems involved in Peterson's thesis becomes evident in A. Grillmeier, *Mit ihm und in ihm: Christologische Forschungen und Perspektiven* (Freiburg, 1975), 386–419.

9. Such things could occasionally be heard in spoken remarks that may have roughly paraphrased discussions by H. Mühlen, especially in his book *Entsakralisierung* (Paderborn, 1971), 228ff., 240ff., 376–96, 401–40. Although Mühlen's own arguments are striking and advance scholarship, it seems to me they are not free of the danger of a new analogous way of thinking that exaggerates the applicability of the trinitarian doctrine to ecclesiology.

not conclude that such reflections are *entirely* sterile and useless, it is plain that they are a distortion of trinitarian doctrine and an intolerably oversimplified fusion of Creed and Church polity. What is needed is a more profound approach. It seems to me that it is important, first of all, to reestablish a clearer connection between the theology of communion, which had developed from the idea of collegiality, and a theology of personality, which is no less important in interpreting the biblical facts. Not only does the communal character of the history created by God belong to the structure of the Bible, but also and equally personal responsibility. The “we” does not dissolve the “I” and “you,” but rather it confirms and intensifies them so as to make them almost definitive. This is evident already in the importance that a name has in the Old Testament—for God and for men. One could even say that in the Bible “name” takes the place of what philosophical reflection would eventually designate by the word “person.”¹⁰ Corresponding to God, who has a name, that is, who can address others and be addressed, is man, who is called by name in the history of revelation and is held personally responsible.¹¹ This principle is further intensified in the New Testament and attains its fullest, deepest meaning through the fact that now the People of God is generated, not by birth, but rather by a call and a response. Therefore it is no longer a collective consignee as before, when the whole people functioned as a sort of corporate individual vis-à-vis world history, in collective punishment, in collective liability, penance, and pardon. The “new people” is characterized also by a new structure of personal responsibility, which is manifest in the personalizing of the cultic event: from now on everyone is named by name in penance and, as a consequence of the personal baptism that he received as this particular person, is also called by name to do personal penance, for which the general “we have sinned” can no longer be an adequate substitute.¹² Another consequence of this structure is, for example,

10. Cf. J. Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ: Meditations on the Triune God*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 15–25.

11. Cf. the significance of the genealogies in the structure of biblical history.

12. This is incisively elaborated in H. U. von Balthasar, “Umkehr im Neuen Testament,” *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift* 3 (1974): 481–91. Trans-

the fact that the liturgy does not simply speak about the Church in general but presents her by name in the Canon of the Mass: with the names of the saints and the names of those who bear the responsibility for unity. From this perspective, incidentally, it seemed to me questionable that in the first German version of the liturgical Lectionary the names were omitted (probably for fear of making historically inaccurate attributions), and Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans, for instance, was no longer presented with the Apostle's name and authority; rather, it was presented as an anonymous text of uncertain provenance and with no one to vouch for it personally.¹³

It is in keeping with this personal structure, furthermore, that in the Church there has never been anonymous leadership of the Christian community. Paul writes in his own name as the one ultimately responsible for his congregations. But again and again he addresses by name those also who hold authority with him and under him; recall the lists of greetings in 1 Corinthians and the Letter to the Romans, or the comment in 1 Corinthians 4:17: "Therefore I sent you Timothy . . . , to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every Church;" or the Letter to the Philippians, in which Paul (4:2) singles out Euodia and Syntyche and addresses his "true coworker" in the second person singular. Along these same lines, lists of bishops were compiled already at the beginning of the second century (Hegesippus) so as to emphasize for the historical record the particular and personal responsibility of those witnesses to Jesus Christ.¹⁴ This process is profoundly in keeping with the central structure of the New Testament faith: to *the one* witness, Jesus Christ, correspond *the*

lated by Andrée Emery as "Conversion in the New Testament," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 1 (Spring 1974): 46-59.

13. Although the intention was to avoid the problem of the disputed authorship of some texts, this was an example of mistaking the level and misunderstanding the liturgical message, which necessarily stands on the firm historical ground of the faith but must not be viewed as a forum in which to decide historical debates.

14. The structural importance of these lists as reference points for the concept of tradition in the structure of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* is demonstrated in a dissertation by V. Twomey on ecclesiology in the works of Eusebius and Athanasius.

many witnesses who, precisely because they are witnesses, stand up for him by name. Martyrdom as a response to the Cross of Jesus Christ is nothing other than the ultimate confirmation of this principle of uncompromising particularity, of the named individual who is personally responsible.¹⁵

Witness implies particularity, but witness—as a response to the Cross and Resurrection—is the primordial and fundamental form of Christian discipleship in general. In addition, however, even this principle is anchored in the very belief in the triune God, for the Trinity becomes meaningful for us and recognizable in the first place through the fact that God himself, in his Son as man, became a witness to himself, and thus his personal nature took concrete form even unto the radical anthropomorphism of the “form of a servant,” of “the likeness of men” (μορφή δούλου, ὁμοίωμα ἀνθρώπου: Phil 2:7).¹⁶

The Petrine theology of the New Testament is found along this line of reasoning, and therein it has its intrinsically necessary character. The “we” of the Church begins with the name of the one who in particular and as a person first uttered the profession of faith in Christ: “You are . . . the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). Curiously, the passage on primacy is usually thought to begin with Matthew 16:17, whereas the early Church regarded verse 16 as the decisive verse for an understanding of the whole account: Peter becomes the Rock of the Church as the bearer of the Credo, of her faith in God, which is a concrete faith in Christ as the Son and by that very fact faith in the Father and, thus, a trinitarian faith, which only the Spirit of God can communicate.¹⁷

15. The essential meaning of martyrdom in the structure of the Christian act of faith is beautifully set forth by K. Bommers, *Weizen Gottes: Untersuchungen zur Theologie des Martyriums bei Ignatius von Antiochien* (Cologne and Bonn, 1976); see also E. Peterson, “Zeuge der Wahrheit,” in *Theologische Traktate*, 165–224. The fact that martyrdom can find no place in Hans Küng’s *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (London, 1977), 573–76 (see also the summary of the basic thesis, 601f.), is, from this perspective, quite telling.

16. For an exegesis of this fundamental passage, see J. Gnilka, *Der Philipperbrief* (Freiburg, 1968), 111–47.

17. Not to have noticed this is the weakness of the otherwise commendable study by J. Ludwig, *Die Primatworte Mt 16, 18.19 in der altkirchlichen Exegese, Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen*, ed. M. Meinertz, vol. 19, no. 4 (Münster, 1954). This bars the way to an understanding of Leo the Great, but all the other Church Fathers, too, should be reexamined thoroughly in terms of an

The early Church viewed verses 17–19 as simply the explanation of verse 16: To recite the Creed is never man’s own work, and thus the one who says in the obedience of the profession of faith what he cannot say on his own can also do and become what he could not do and become by his own resources. This perspective does not include the “either-or” that was first suggested in Augustine and has dominated the theological scene since the sixteenth century, when the alternative was formulated: Is Peter as a *person* the foundation of the Church, or is his *profession of faith* the foundation of the Church? The answer is: The profession of faith exists only as something for which someone is personally responsible, and hence the profession of faith is connected with the person. Conversely, the foundation is not a person regarded in a metaphysically neutral way, so to speak, but rather the person as the bearer of the profession of faith—one without the other would miss the significance of what is meant.

Leaving out many intermediate steps in the argument, we can say, then: The “we” unity of Christians, which God instituted in Christ through the Holy Spirit under the name of Jesus Christ and as a result of his witness, certified by his death and Resurrection, is in turn maintained by personal bearers of responsibility for this unity, and it is once again personified in Peter—in Peter, who receives a new name and is thus lifted up out of what is merely his own, yet precisely in a *name*, through which demands are made of him as a person with personal responsibility. In his new name, which transcends the historical individual, Peter becomes the institution that goes through history (for the ability to continue and continuance are included in this new appellation), yet in such a way that this institution can exist only as a person and in particular and personal responsibility.

II. RETROSPECTIVE PROOF: THE MATYROLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE PRIMACY

At this point a question arises that has become increasingly dra-

inquiry that is not so narrowly framed. Compare Stefan Horn’s book *Petrou Kathedra: Der Bischof von Rom und die Synode von Ephesus und Chalcedon* (Paderborn: Verlag Bonifatius-Druckerei, 1982), which corrects the omissions in Ludwig’s study.

matic since the sixteenth century: Do not the demands that are made along with the name of Peter altogether exceed the dimensions of a human being? Can this extreme claim of the personality principle still be justified, both anthropologically and also from the basic perspective of the Bible? Or is it such that it befits Christ alone, and, consequently, applying it to a “Vicar of Christ” can only violate the principle of *solus Christus*? If so, then that would answer the single exegetical question, from the overall perspective, to the effect that any Petrine theology of the type just described would contradict the core statements of the New Testament and, consequently, should be called apostasy. It is true that any evaluation of individual exegetical findings depends on an overall perspective, and it follows that the decision, pro or con, cannot be made solely in the exegesis of a particular passage. Moreover, today, as F. Mußner has convincingly made clear, there is hardly any disputing, on the basis of the particular findings, the existence of a Petrine theology and a Petrine ministry that were meant to be lasting;¹⁸ on the other hand, the overall perspective of the New Testament seems to be all the more tellingly opposed to such a ministry. (Meanwhile the idea of a merely pastoral primacy, without juridical status, can be left out of consideration as factually irrelevant.)¹⁹

1. The witness structure of the primacy as the necessary consequence of the opposition of world and Church

I will attempt to give an answer to the question, thus framed, in connection with a historical controversy that, in my opinion, has retained its exemplary character and has led to the development of one of the most profound theologies of the primacy, in which the ecumenical dimension of the topic is preserved in a way hardly to be found anywhere else. I mean the debate that Cardinal Reginald Pole conducted with King Henry VIII, Cranmer,

18. Cf. F. Mußner, “Petrusgestalt und Petrusdienst in der Sicht der späten Urkirche: Redaktionsgeschichtliche Überlegungen,” in *Dienst an der Einheit*, ed. J. Ratzinger (Düsseldorf, 1978), 27–45.

19. This idea, which was proposed by Luther in the Leipzig Disputation, adopted by Melancthon, and recently revived by Hans Küng, is still unrealistic: a responsibility that cannot be responsible is no responsibility at all.

and Bishop Sampson with regard to the events in the Church of England concerning the primacy. We can see the real relevance of these questions for Pole from the fact that his life and homeland were at stake, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, that he was the favored candidate in the papal elections during the conclave of 1549–1550 and was thought for a moment to have been elected; finally, it should be added that in the final years of his life he was suspected of advocating a Lutheran doctrine of justification and of being a heretic himself.²⁰

Pole was confronted with Sampson's thesis that the papacy as such contradicted Christian humility and was from the outset incompatible with it—substantially the very same opinion that we described previously, in somewhat different words, as the central theological objection of Reformation Christianity in general.²¹ On the contrary, for Pole it was clear that the denial of the primatial principle in fact abolishes the New Testament structure and reinstates the exclusive claim of the secular power. Accordingly, he says that Sampson “evidently cannot imagine any other authority than that which can kill the body and rob someone of his outward possessions.”²² In the concrete case of England, the denial of the papacy meant the transfer of the external order of the Church to the state, that is, the state church system, and along with this secular rule over the Church the simultaneous suppression of *martyrium* (personal witness). Conversely, this meant (and here we finally come to the real reason, which is psychological and at the same time theological, that caused Pole to become a defender of the papacy): the martyrs who countered national Christianity subject to the crown with their faith in the supranational unity of the universal Church and her tradition were the guides who showed where the Christian had to stand, as a Christian, in this conflict.

20. On this subject, see the dissertation by M. Trimpe, *Macht aus Gehorsam: Grundmotive der Theologie des päpstlichen Primats im Denken Reginald Poles (1500–1558)* (dissertation, University of Regensburg, 1972). The following discussion of Pole draws on this study. See also W. Schenk, *Reginald Pole: Cardinal of England* (London, 1950); D. Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Cardinal Pole and the Counter-Reformation* (Cambridge, 1971).

21. Cf. Trimpe, *Macht aus Gehorsam*, chap. 11, sec. 2, p. 137, and p. 412, n. 51.

22. R. Pole, *Pro ecclesiasticae unitatis defensione libri quatuor* (Rome, undated, ca. 1553–1554), 15 r 27 [=p. 15 recto, line 27].

This had two consequences:

a. The martyrs and the theology of *martyrium* provided Pole with an approach to the theology of primacy. Moreover, he hit precisely upon the early Christian core of the theology of primacy, as it first becomes evident in John 21:18f. One can die only in person. The primacy as a testimony to the profession of faith in Christ is to be understood first in terms of the witness for which personal responsibility is taken in martyrdom, as the verification of one's witness to the Crucified who is victorious upon the Cross.

b. Against the background of such a theology of martyrdom/witness, the primacy figures essentially as the guarantee of the contrast between the Church in her catholic unity and the secular power, which is always particular.²³

In this connection now we ought to ask, historically, what real content can be ascribed to Petrine theology if one does not view the Successor to Peter in the Bishop of Rome as its historical fulfillment. For those passages in the New Testament do exist and demand an explanation. Viewed historically, we can ascertain four answers, and it would hardly be possible to find any more; they exhaust the possibilities, although the details may vary.

The *first* answer is the Roman Petrine tradition.

The *second* answer was given by early fifth- and sixth-century Byzantine theology, which applied Matthew 16:16–19 and the whole plenipotentary tradition that is connected with the name of Peter to the emperor; later this answer was hardly ever repeated in such an explicit form, but it reoccurs in fact wherever state–church structures are established.²⁴

A *third* answer can be found in the writings of Theodore the Studite, although he does not propose it as an exclusive solution to the problem. He sees the passages fulfilled in the monks, in the “spiritual men”²⁵—a pneumatological solution, which has

23. In these two points lies the specific thesis I intended to develop in this lecture—therefore, by no means a sort of “real utopia,” as it seemed to many listeners.

24. On this subject, see the material that A. Grillmeier has compiled in his essay “Auriga mundi,” in *Mit ihm und in ihm*, 386–419, esp. 407.

25. Cf. P. Kawerau, *Das Christentum des Ostens* (Stuttgart, 1972), 1077: “Later ages held Basil of Caesarea in such great esteem that he was called a sec-

its importance as the inner dimension of the testimony, so to speak, but cannot exist by itself.

A *fourth* answer, for which Augustine supplied the prototype and which the Reformation took to its logical conclusion, sees the faith of the community as the *petra* (rock) in which the promises are fulfilled. But this interpretation does not do justice to the specific elements in these Gospel passages.²⁶

So we have to say that the only remaining alternatives are the first and the second. But this means that either (as Pole puts it) full and absolute authority on earth has been granted to the state, or else the papacy, as in the “Roman” solution, is established as the powerless yet powerful entity confronting the secular power; the latter applies even when historically this led again and again to an attempt to clothe the powerlessness of this second “power” in worldly power, which obscured and endangered the Church’s authentic character but could not dissolve it.

Let us return to Pole. With the martyrological approach, we already have the basic answer to Sampson’s question and ours: The vicariate of Christ is a vicariate of obedience and of the Cross; thus it is suited to the measure of man, and at the same time it surpasses him as much as being a Christian does in the first place.²⁷

2. *Toward a concept of the primacy understood in martyrological terms*

What this means in practice becomes clearer if by way of example we select a few features from Pole’s idea of the papacy

ond Peter. Theodore the Studite put it this way: ‘You shone forth in the light of your brilliant life . . . ; but you yourself took up the keys like a new Peter and are the guardian of the whole Church.’ Theodore was convinced that the monastic life founded by Basil was the foundation of the Church, and history to a great extent has confirmed that this conviction was correct.”

26. Cf. the comments of F. Mußner in “Petrusgestalt und Petrusdienst” and also his book *Petrus und Paulus—Pole der Einheit* (Freiburg, 1976). For the exegetical findings, see the essays by H. Zimmermann, R. Schnackenburg, G. Schneider, and J. Ernst in *Petrus und Papst*, ed. A. Brandenburg and H. J. Urban (Münster, 1977), 4–62.

27. Hence such a portrayal of the papal mission is as much or as little a utopia as any accurate depiction of the interior demands of being a Christian in general.

while looking for elements of an answer to the question: What form should the papacy take today and in general? Indeed, as a candidate in a papal election, Pole was immediately confronted with this question, and we are in the historically unique position of having a record of the thoughts of a papal candidate in a conclave and of his own struggle with the prospect of taking on that task in a little book—*De Summo Pontifice*—that he wrote during the conclave for his protégé, the youthful Giulio Cardinal de la Rovere.²⁸ In writing a sort of “mirror of the papacy,” he intended to give him an aid to discernment, which endures as a monument to his own spiritual drama and offers us a point of departure for reflecting on the dimensions of the office by correctly outlining its features and at the same time revealing its deepest foundations. What the pope should be and what he should be like is investigated in this book in strictly christological terms.

On the basis of what Christ is, it explains how and along what lines the pope should live out his task of “imitation,” of succession and emulation. That which is a majestic title with reference to Christ (*laudes Christi*) is, with reference to the pope, a pattern for this required imitation.²⁹ In this way Pole approaches Isaiah 9:6f., a passage that was understood christologically in the Church’s exegetical tradition, as a reflection of the papacy. Christ appears as a *parvulus natus* (“for to us a child is born”); christologically, this means that the Lord humbled himself for us, was obedient to the Father, and was sent by him. Christ, “the greatest,” became for our sakes the *parvulus*, the “little one.” Considered from the perspective of the imitation required of the pope, this means:

When you hear that Christ was born and given as a child, apply this with reference to his Vicar to the latter’s election: this is, so to speak, his birth. That means that you must understand that he is not born in this way for himself; he is not elected for his own sake, but rather for us, that is, for the whole flock. . . . In his ministry as shepherd, he must consider and conduct himself as one who is quite little and

28. R. Pole, *De Summo Pontifice Christi in Terris Vicario* (Louvain, 1569). For a thorough account of the composition and significance of this work, see Trimpe, *Macht aus Gehorsam*.

29. *De Summo Pontifice*, 27 r–v [recto–verso].

acknowledge that he knows nothing but this one thing:
 what he has been taught by God the Father through Christ
 (cf. 1 Cor 2:2).³⁰

Pole says that the continuation of the prophecy, “the government will be upon his shoulder,” refers to Christ, heavy laden for our sake; for him the dominant feature in this image is not the word “government,” but rather the bearing of the superhuman burden on his human shoulders. The honorific title “Mighty Hero” is interpreted by the English Cardinal in terms of what “might” or “strength” ultimately means in biblical language, and he finds a statement of this in the Song of Songs: “Love is strong as death” (8:6). The strength in which the Vicar of Christ must come to resemble his Lord is the strength of love that is ready for martyrdom.³¹

Among the titles to be analyzed here, Pole discovers a structure that connects the whole passage again with the point of departure previously outlined and brings to light the real heart of the matter: there are titles that can be described as titles of humility and lowliness (*parvulus natus, filius datus, principatus super humerum* [little Child, Son who is given, government upon his shoulder]), and titles of majesty (*magni consilii angelus, princeps pacis* [angel of great counsel, that is, “Wonderful Counselor,” Prince of Peace], and so on). The two sets are irrevocably interrelated, first in Christ himself and, then, especially in the man who in the Christian faith is supposed to serve as his Vicar. The majestic titles pertain to Christ as *God* by nature; according to his *humanity*, however, he receives them only *after* his humiliation. Analogously, this is true for the representative: the majestic titles are effective and possible only in and by way of humiliation. The only way to participate in Christ’s majesty is concretely through sharing in his lowliness, which is the sole form in which his majesty can be made present and represented in this time. Hence the authentic place of the Vicar of Christ is the Cross: being the Vicar of Christ is abiding in the obedience of the Cross and thus *repraesentatio Christi* in the age of this world, keeping his power

30. *Ibid.*, 28 v and 32 r–v.

31. *Ibid.*, 52 r–v.

present to counterbalance the power of the world³²

Accordingly, with respect to Peter and consequently for the pope, Pole identified *sedes* (seat of authority, “Apostolic See”) and “Cross.” To Rovere’s question, “How is the Chair of Peter, upon which the Vicar of Christ sits, similar to the Cross to which Christ was nailed?” he gives the following answer:

That is not difficult for us to see, once we have understood that the Chair of the Vicar of Christ is the one that Peter established in Rome when he planted the Cross of Christ there. . . . During his entire pontificate he never descended from it, but rather, “exalted with Christ” according to the spirit, his hands and feet were fastened with nails in such a way that he wished, not to go where his own will urged him, but rather to remain wherever God’s will guided him (cf. Jn 21:18), and his heart and mind were fastened there.³³

The English Cardinal expresses it in the same way in another passage: “The office of the papacy is a cross, indeed, the greatest of all crosses. For what can be said to pertain more to the cross and anxiety of the soul than the care and responsibility for all the Churches throughout the world?” Moreover, he recalls Moses, who groaned under the burden of the whole Israelite people, could no longer bear it, and yet had to bear it.³⁴ To be bound up with the will of God, with the Word of whom he is the messenger, is the experience of being girt and led against his will of which John 21 speaks.

Yet this attachment to the Word and will of God because of the Lord is what makes the *sedes* a cross and thus proves the Vicar to be a representative. He abides in obedience and thus in personal responsibility for Christ; professing the Lord’s death and Resurrection is his whole commission and personal responsibil-

32. Ibid., 55 r: “. . . nemo possit sequi Christum in iis quae ad gloriam spectant: nisi prius illum sequutus sit in eo, quod in hominum oculis nullam gloriae speciem obtinet.” See also 43 r: “. . . hanc praeclaram Christi personam . . . a nemine referri posse: qui non Christum ante in prioribus illis infirmitatis titulis . . . fuerit imitatus.”

33. Ibid., 132 v–133 r.

34. Ibid., 133 v: “. . . munus ipsum Pontificatus Crucem esse et eam quidem omnium maximam. Quod enim magis ad Crucem et sollicitudinem animi (pertinere) dici potest, quam universarum orbis terrae Ecclesiarum cura atque procuratio?” Cf. ibid., 50 v 1.

ity, in which the common profession of the Church is depicted as personally “binding” through the one who is bound

This personal liability, which forms the heart of the doctrine of papal primacy, is therefore not opposed to the theology of the Cross or contrary to *humilitas christiana*³⁵ but rather follows from it and is the point of its utmost concreteness and, at the same time, the public contradiction of the claim that the power of the world is the only power and also the establishment of the power of obedience in opposition to worldly power. *Vicarius Christi* is a title most profoundly rooted in the theology of the Cross and thus an interpretation of Matthew 16:16–19 and John 21:15–19 that points to the inner unity of these two passages. No doubt, another facet of the bondage that in light of John 21 can be described as a definitive characteristic of the papacy will be the fact that this being bound up with God’s will, which is expressed in God’s Word, means being bound up with the “we” of the whole Church: collegiality and primacy are interdependent. But they do not merge in such a way that the personal responsibility ultimately disappears into anonymous governing bodies. Precisely in their inseparability, personal responsibility serves unity, which it will doubtless bring about the more effectively, the more true it remains to its roots in the theology of the Cross. Thus Pole also defended the thesis that the man most suited to become the pope is the one who, from the perspective of a human choice of candidates, would be considered the least qualified in terms of the ideals of political shrewdness and executive power. The more a man resembles the Lord and thus (objectively) recommends himself as a candidate, the less human reason considers him capable of governing, because reason cannot fathom humiliation or the Cross.³⁶

CONCLUSION: A VIEW OF THE SITUATION IN CHRISTENDOM

Certainly it would be foolish to expect that in the foreseeable fu-

35. In this context, *humilitas* means humility, not simply as a moral virtue, but also as the objective recognition that righteousness is not the product of one’s own efforts but, rather, the fruit of sanctifying grace.

36. *De Summo Pontifice* 79 r–v; 82 r; 90 r.

ture a general unification of Christendom will occur around the papacy, understood as an acknowledgment of the Successor of Peter in Rome.³⁷ Perhaps it is also part of the necessary bondage and limitation of this commission that it can never be completely fulfilled and hence has to experience also the opposing presence of the Christian faithful, who expose whatever in him is not vicarious power but rather his own power. Nevertheless, even in this very way a unifying function of the pope extending beyond the communion of the Roman Catholic Church can become effective. Even in the opposition to the claim of his office, the pope personally remains in view of the whole world a point of reference with regard to the responsibility borne and expressed for the Word of faith, and thus he remains a challenge, noticed by all and concerning all, to seek greater fidelity to this Word and, furthermore, a challenge to struggle for unity and to take responsibility for the lack of unity. In this sense, there is even in division itself a unifying function of the papacy, a function that in the final analysis no one can ignore in surveying the historical drama of Christendom. For the papacy and the Catholic Church, criticism of the papacy by non-Catholic Christians remains an incentive to seek an ever more Christlike actualization of the Petrine ministry; for non-Catholic Christians, in turn, the pope is the abiding, visible challenge to achieve the concrete unity to which the Church is called and which ought to be her identifying feature in the world's eyes. May we on both sides succeed in accepting without reservations the question that is posed to us and the task that is given to us and, thus, in obedience to the Lord, become that space of peace which prepares the new world—the kingdom of God.—*Translated by Michael J. Miller* □

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37. Concerning the status of the ecumenical debate, see the study by F. Mußner mentioned in n. 25 and R. E. Brown, K. P. Donfried, and J. Reumann, eds., *Der Petrus der Bibel: Eine ökumenische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart, 1976), as well as a series of essays in the work by A. Brandenburg and H. J. Urban, *Petrus und Papst*, also mentioned in n. 26.