

Christ the True Roman Pontiff upon Whom Salvation Depends

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Reformed · Late Medieval · Treatise

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INTRODUCTION

Written in 1413, during the final embattled years before the Council of Constance condemned him to the stake, Hus mounts here a direct assault on the claim that submission to the Roman pope is necessary for salvation. His counter-argument is disarmingly simple: Christ himself is the true Roman pontiff, and every scriptural passage marshaled for papal supremacy points past the bishop of Rome to the eternal High Priest at God's right hand. The treatise circulated in Bohemia as part of the wider polemical exchange that would shape the Hussite movement and, a century later, furnish Luther with both arguments and a martyr. Expect close scholastic reasoning threaded with pastoral urgency — a man reading Scripture as if his life depends on it, because it did.

To the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ, which honor and also Christ the aforesaid doctors nowhere mention in their writing, this conclusion is proved, namely, "to be subject to the Roman pontiff is necessary for salvation for every human being." 1 From this it is clear, that no one can be saved unless he is meritoriously subject to Jesus Christ. But Christ is the Roman pontiff, just as he is the head of the universal church and every particular church. Therefore the conclusion is a true one. The consequence is clear from the major premise. And the minor premise is clear from the things said above and from what is said in I Peter 2 : 25, "For ye were sometime going astray like sheep but are now returned unto the shepherd and bishop of your souls," and also from Heb. 7 : 22: "By so much also hath Jesus become the surety of a better covenant and they indeed have been made free, many in number, according to the law because that by death they are hindered from continuing. But this man, because he continueth forever, hath his priesthood unchangeable, wherefore also he is able to save to the uttermost, drawing near through himself 2 to the Lord and always living to intercede for us. For such a high priest became us holy, guileless, undefiled, separated from sinners and made higher than the heavens, who needeth not daily like those priests, to offer up sacrifices first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people, for this he did once for all when he offered himself."

Truly this is the most holy and chief Roman pontiff, sitting at God's right hand and dwelling with us, for he said: "And lo, I am with you all the days, even unto the consummation of the age," Matt. 28 : 20. For that person, Christ, is everywhere present, since he is very God whose right it is to be everywhere

without limitation. He is the bishop, who baptizes and takes away the sins of the world, John 1 : 29. He is the one who joins in marriage so that no man may put asunder: "What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder," Matt. 19 : 6. He is the one who makes us priests: "He made us a kingdom and priests," Rev. 1 : 6. He performs the sacrament of the eucharist, saying: "This is my body," Luke 22 : 19. This is he who confirms his faithful ones: "I will give you a mouth of wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to withstand or gainsay," Luke 21 : 15. He it is who feeds his sheep by his word and example and by the food of his body. All these things, however, he does on his part indefectibly, because he is a holy priest, guileless, undefiled, separated from sinners and made higher than the heavens. He is the bishop holding supreme guardianship over his flock, because he sleeps not nor is he, that watches over Israel, weary. He is the pontiff who in advance makes the way easy for us to the heavenly country. He is the pope — papa — because he is the wonderful Prince of Peace, the Father of the future age. For, indeed, such a pontiff became us who, since he was in the form of God, did not think it robbery to be equal with God but emptied himself, taking upon him the form of a servant, because he humbled himself by being made obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God hath highly exalted him and given him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, of things on the earth, and things in hell [Phil. 2 : 6 sqq.).

To this the conclusion follows, namely: "To be subject to the Roman pontiff is necessary for salvation for every human being." But there is no other such pontiff except the Lord Jesus Christ himself, our pontiff. This is so because the humanity of Christ is not subject to any other pontiff as of necessity to salvation, inasmuch as God hath exalted him and given him a name which is to be the most worthy above every other name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every power bend in obedience to him "of things in heaven," that is, the angels; "things on the earth," that is, all men; and "of things in hell," that is, the devils. And it is also so because Christ's mother was a human being; John the Baptist also, Peter the apostle, and other saints now in heaven, and for none of these was it necessary for salvation to be subject to any other Roman pontiff besides Christ, seeing that they are already saved, persons whom no Roman pontiff can loose or bind. Therefore, Pope Clement extended his authority all too far when in his bull *The Angels of Paradise*, he commanded the angels to lead into the everlasting joys the soul of one who had died on a journey to Rome to secure indulgence, and who had been absolved from purgatory. For this pope wished that at his command the heavenly angels should bow their knees. And he added, "We wish that the pain of hell be not inflicted upon that soul in any degree," and so he commanded that the power or the knees of the spirits in hell should also bow at his command. Not so did the apostles presume, for John wished not to command but to worship at the feet of angels, as he said, Rev. 22 : 8: "I, John, fell down to worship before the feet of the angel, and he said to me, see thou do it not, for I am a fellow servant with thee and with thy brethren the prophets and with them that keep the words of the prophecy of this book. Worship God." See how great is this apostle and prophet, beloved of God, who without doubt excelled modern popes and notably Clement, who gave command to the angels. He did not wish to give any command to an angel but, falling down, wished to worship before his feet, and the holy angel forbade him, showing him that he ought to worship God.

But in view of Heb. 7 : 23, "many indeed are made priests according to the law," it is to be noted that every high priest of the old law prefigured Christ in all his legal acts. Therefore he is called, uniquely, the High Priest and Bishop of our souls, and for this reason that multitude of priests and their offices are fulfilled in Christ alone, as the apostle says in Heb. 7 and 9. And this is the reason why the apostles did not call themselves most holy popes, heads of the universal church, or universal pontiffs; but, having with them the High Priest even unto the consummation of the age, they called themselves servants of Christ, his companions in tribulation and ministers of the church. Hence this holy custom was observed in the time of St. Gregory, Decretum, Dist. 92 [Friedberg, 1 : 318]; and in the preface of his letter [Nic. Fathers, 2d Ser., 12 : 241] Gregory says: "See how, so far as I am concerned, I forbade that thou shouldst use that word of proud entitlement. Thou wert concerned to confer upon me the title of universal pope which I beg thy most sweet holiness not to do any more, for in this way would be taken away from thee and shown to another more authority than reason allows. I do not seek to be advanced with words — [titles] — but by my good life — moribus. Nor do I regard that to be an honor wherein I would know that my brethren had lost their honor. For mine is also the honor of the universal church; my honor is the solid stability of my brethren. Then am I honored, when the honor due is not denied to any single one of them, for if thy holiness entitles me universal pope, it denies that thou art this, because thy holiness professes that I am the whole — universum. But far be that from us! Away with words which puff up vanity and wound love!" From the words of this holy pope the deduction is to be drawn that he may be easily puffed up who is called most holy father, though he perhaps lives in sin and is struck through with flattery or through ignorance lies.

Therefore, Gregory most notably says: "I desire not to be advanced with words but by a good life." Alas ! not thus do modern pontiffs think who, destitute of good lives — morals — glory in a bare title, imagining to themselves that the name, Holiness, befits them in virtue of their office or ecclesiastical dignity. But if this reasoning held, then Judas would have had to be called holy apostle. But blessed be the Lord, who, in order to remove this cloak, said to his disciples: "Have I not chosen you and one of you is a devil?" John 6 : 70. This he said before Iscariot had betrayed his master.

Hence holy men, when they have been praised by men, have humbled themselves and have burdened their minds with fear, lest praise should cast them down from a merit still more worthy. Therefore, Peter, Christ's apostle, when he was called by messengers went humbly to the Gentile, Cornelius, and when he was on the way, Cornelius went to meet him, instructed by an angel of Peter's holiness, and worshipped at Peter's feet. And Peter, taught of God about Cornelius and assured through revelation of his blessedness, did not permit Cornelius to lie at his feet as do modern pontiffs in whom not a scintilla of holiness is seen. Nay, often they are conscious of their sin in allowing themselves to be revered and, on that account, make the more ostentation, and if the ostentatious title — *titulus pompositatis* — be omitted, they at once shake with anger.

Wishing to put an end to this pride, the African council,¹ Dist. 99 [Friedberg, i : 350], says: "Let not the bishop of the first see be called the prince of priests or high priest or anything of this kind, but only bishop of the first see. And the Roman pontiff is not to be called universal bishop." Proscribed are all these things which proceed from ostentations, pride, flattery, avarice, and from the blind deception of the unlearned. Returning, therefore, to our most lowly High Priest, Jesus Christ, who bade him that

was called to the wedding take the lowest place [Luke 14 : 9], let us confess to him according to his precept that we are unprofitable servants, Luke 17 : 10. For he said: "When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants." For, when we have kept all his precepts, and shall have humbled our souls before this High Priest — knowing that it is possible that our pontiffs may be thieves and robbers — this Bishop of our souls will not fail us in things necessary to salvation, but will pasture, guard, and feed his sheep as a truly good Shepherd.

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