

The Pope Not the Head of the Church But Christs Vicar

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Reformed · Late Medieval · Treatise

STROMATA 232

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INTRODUCTION

Written in 1413 as Hus prepared for the confrontation that would end at the stake in Constance, these pages answer a treatise by eight theologians of the Prague faculty who had defended papal and cardinalatial supremacy against him. Hus dismantles their ecclesiology by insisting that the true church is the body of the predestined under Christ its only head, marshaling the cases of Constantine II, the quarreling Gregories, and the legendary Pope Joan to show that the papal office as then defined could be occupied by the unlearned, the female, or the antichrist. The argument here would pass through the Bohemian reform into Luther's own break with Rome a century later. Expect close, patient polemic — a scholastic disputation conducted by a man who already sees where it will lead him.

Further, the aforesaid doctors lay down in their writing that " the pope is head of the Roman church and the college of cardinals the body, and that they are very successors and princes of the apostle Peter and the college of Christ's other apostles in ecclesiastical omce for the purpose of discerning and defining all catholic and church matters, correcting and purging all errors in respect to them and, in all these matters, to have the care of all the churches and of all the faithful of Christ. For in order to govern the church throughout the whole world it is fitting there should always continue to be such manifest and true successors in the office of Peter, the prince of the apostles, and of the college of the other apostles of Christ. And such successors cannot be found or procured on the earth other than the pope, the existing head, and the college of cardinals, the existing body, of the aforesaid Roman church."

These follies, long drawn out, which, I think, proceeded for the most part from the brain of Stanislaus, overcome and terrified by the Roman curia, involve many points. And in regard to these, I note that in their writing the church is taken to mean all Christian pilgrims. They seem to admit this when they say that " the body of the clergy in the kingdom of Bohemia, not only with the whole body of clergy in the world but also with the whole body of Christendom, always feels and believes as the faith dictates. just as the Roman church does." Or, secondly, these doctors call the pope, together with his cardinals, alone the Roman church, when they say that they believe just as the Roman church believes and not otherwise, the pope being the head of this Roman church and the cardinals the body. In these ways only, so far as I can see, do the doctors designate the church in their writing.

I assume that the pope stands for that spiritual bishop who, in the highest way and in the most similar way, occupies the place of Christ, just as Peter did after the ascension. But if any person whatsoever is to be called pope — whom the Western church accepts as Roman bishop — appointed to decide as the final court ecclesiastical cases and to teach the faithful whatever he wishes, then there is an abuse of the term, because according to this view, it would be necessary in cases to concede that the most unlettered layman or a female, or a heretic and antichrist, may be pope. This is plain, for Constantine II, an unlettered layman, was suddenly ordained a priest and through ambition made pope and then was deposed and all the things which he ordained were declared invalid, about A. D. 707. 1 And the same is plain from the case of Gregory, who was unlettered and consecrated another in addition to himself. And as the people were displeased with the act, a third pope was superinduced. Then these quarrelling among themselves, the emperor came to Rome and elected another as sole pope. As for a female, it is plain in the case of Agnes, who was called John Anglicus,¹ and of her Castrensis, 5 :3,2 writes: "A certain woman sat in the papal chair two years and five months, following Leo. She is said to have been a girl, called Agnes, of the nation of Mainz, was led about by her paramour in a man's dress in Athens and named John Anglicus. She made such progress in different studies that, coming to Rome, she read the trivium to an audience of great teachers. Finally, elected pope, she was with child by her paramour, and, as she was proceeding from St. Peter's to the Lateran, she had the pains of labor in a narrow street between the Colosseum and St. Clement's and gave birth to a child. Shortly afterward she died there and was buried. For this reason it is said that all the popes avoid this street. Therefore, she is not put down in the catalogue of popes."

As for a heretic occupying the papal chair we have an instance in Liberius, of whom Castrensis writes, IV [Rolls Ser., 5 : 158], that at Constantius's command he was exiled for three years because he wished 1 to favor the Arians. At the counsel of the same Constantius, the Roman clergy ordained Felix pope who, during the sessions of a synod condemned and cast out two Arian presbyters, Ursacius and Valens, and when this became known, Liberius was recalled from exile, and being wearied by his long exile and exhilarated by the reoccupation of the papal chair, he yielded to heretical depravity; and when Felix was cast down, Liberius with violence held the church of Peter and Paul and St. Lawrence so that the clergy and priests who favored Felix were murdered in the church, and Felix was martyred, Liberius not preventing.

As for antichrist occupying the papal chair, it is evident that a pope living contrary to Christ, like any other perverted person, is called by common consent antichrist. In accordance with John 2 : 22, many are become antichrists. And the faithful will not dare to deny persistently that it is possible for the man of sin to sit in the holy place. Of him the Saviour prophesied when he said: "When ye see the abomination of desolation, which is spoken of by Daniel, standing in the holy place," Matt. 24 : 15. The apostle also says: "Let no man beguile you in any wise, for it will not be except the falling away come first and the man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; he that opposeth and exalteth himself against all that is called God or is worshipped; so that he sitteth in the temple of God setting himself forth as God," II Thess. 2 : 3-4. And it is apparent from the Chronicles how the papal dignity has sunk.

For the emperor Constantine, about A. D. 301, thought and commanded that the highest bishop should be called by all pope and in his dotation that name also sprang up. The emperor Phocas likewise, about

the year 600, at the instance of the clergy confirmed this same thing, as may be read in his Annals. Therefore, Castrensis, 4 : 14, describes how the excellency of the Roman empire helped the papacy of the Roman pontiff above others. He says: "The Nicene council conferred this prerogative on the Roman pontiff, that, just as Augustus had rank above other kings, so the Roman pontiff should be held as bishop, and the pope be called chief father — principalis pater." 1 The origin, however, of this name and this excellency is to be found in the dotation of the church, as is indicated in the Decretum, 96, Dist. Constant.

These things being noted, in order to remove ambiguity, I assume that the doctors in their writing designate by the Roman church that church of which the Saviour said to Peter: "On this rock I will build my church" (see Chapter VII). The holy writers and the Decretals speak of it as the Roman church, Dist. 21:3 [Friedberg, 1 : 70], 24 : 1, capp. 9, 14 [Friedberg, 1 : 969, 970]. And in the Clementines, de Jurejurando [Friedberg, 2 : 1147], it is said: "*The Romans, princes, professors of the orthodox faith, venerate with warm faith and pure devotion the holy Roman church, whose head is Christ, our Saviour, and the Roman pontiff, the Saviour's vicar.*" 2 And in the Sextus it is said: "*Our alma mater, the church*" [Friedberg, 2 : 1106], and in the Extravagante of Boniface VIII, "*The holy Roman church.*" And the same is true of the other statements made in other places and alleged above.

In regard to these follies of the Unlearned — indoctorum — I find these points: (1) The pope is the head of the holy Roman church. (2) The college of cardinals is the body of the holy Roman church. (3) The pope is manifestly and truly was more influential than anything else in building up the arrogant claims of the papacy. Dante denied the right of Constantine to grant secular power to the pope, but did not call in question the authenticity of Constantine's gift. He expressed himself in the lines:

Ah, Constantine, of how much ill was cause
Not thy conversion, but those rich domains
Which the first wealthy pope received of thee.

The fraud was not shown up till the middle of the fifteenth century by Laurentius Valla, and a profound impression was made upon Luther in 1520 when he was informed of the fraudulent character of the document by von Huttich. Of course, Constantine was baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia, and not till the very last year of his life and never had the leprosy. Huss fully believed the story and often refers to the donation as the beginning of papal wealth, pomp, and corruption. The text in Mirbt, pp. 81-87. Also Boehmer's art. in Herzog, the successor of the prince of the apostles, Peter. (4) Cardinals are manifest and true successors of the college of Christ's other apostles. (5) For the government of the church throughout the whole world, there should always be manifest and true successors of the same kind in the office of the prince of the apostles and in the office of Christ's other apostles. (6) Such successors are not to be found or procured on the earth, other than the pope, the existing head and the college of cardinals, the existing body of the church.

Against all these six points, the argument in brief runs thus: all truth in the religion of Christ is to be followed and only that is truth which is known by the bodily senses, or discovered by an infallible intelligence, or made known through revelation, or laid down in sacred Scripture. But none of these six points is truth known by the bodily senses or discovered by an infallible intelligence or known through revelation, or laid down in divine Scripture. Therefore, no one of these six points is truth in

the religion of Jesus Christ which is to be followed. The major premise is seen in what St. Augustine says, *Enchiridion*, 4 [Nic. Fathers, 3 : 238]: "These things chiefly, yea almost exclusively, are to be followed in religion, and he who contradicts them is altogether a stranger to the name of Christ or he is a heretic. . . . These things are to be defended by the reason whether they start from the bodily senses or are discovered by the intelligence of the mind. But these things, which we have not been aware of through the bodily senses or been able to reach with the mind, nor now are able — these are beyond doubt to be believed on the testimony of those witnesses by whom the Scriptures, deservedly called divine, were written, because, assisted with divine help, they were able to see these things or to foresee them either through the bodily senses or through the mind." Thus much St. Augustine.

The minor premise, however, the doctors are unable to disprove unless one of these six points should be revealed to them by divine revelation. For neither by the bodily senses, nor by the reason, nor from sacred Scripture do these points appear. Yea, the doctors in making these points authoritative, so that they must be believed, are seen to be anathema by the authority of Augustine himself which they adduce in their writing. If any one venerate any other scriptures than those which the catholic church has received or has handed down to be held as authoritative, let him be anathema. This is clear because these doctors have offered their own writings as authoritative and to be believed and the catholic church has not received them for they are found neither in the divine law nor in the code of canons. Therefore, it follows that these doctors are themselves anathema, and it is clear that religious faith is not held by them so far as these points are concerned unless they prove them plainly or show them to be founded in sacred Scripture or in clear reasoning, for Augustine says, Ep. ad Hieron., Decretum, Dist. 9 : 5 [Friedberg, i : 17]: "I have learned to give only to those writers, who are now called canonical, honor and regard, so that I would not dare to believe that any of them erred in writing. But other writers I will read in as far as they seem to excel by sanctity or true doctrine but I will not regard as true what they say because they have felt it to be true, but because they have been able to convince me by other writers, or by canonical or probable reasons, that they do not differ from the truth."

Inasmuch as these doctors are not writers of sacred Scripture — it being granted that they excel by their sanctity — the faithful are not, therefore, to think a thing is true because they feel it to be true unless by other writers of Scripture or for canonical or probable reasons they prove that these points do not deviate from the truth. Then, similarly, as to the point that the pope is always and uniformly to be regarded as the head of the Roman church, and that he teach the people whether for the whole clergy that lived at that time and held Agnes to be a true pope, Agnes was really the head of the church; or, if the church was at that time without a head — acephalous — with only a nominal pope in the church militant for two years and five months, the faithful for that reason ought not to think that it is not of the substance of the catholic faith to believe expressly [beyond a doubt] that Liberius, Joanna, Boniface, Clement, or Urban were predestinate or members of holy mother church — in view of the judgment given above.

In the same way, it is not of necessity to salvation for all Christians, living together, that they should believe expressly that any one is head of any church whatsoever unless his evangelical life and works plainly moved them to believe this. For it would be all too much presumption to affirm that we are heads of any particular church which perhaps might be a part of holy mother church. How, therefore, may any one of us without revelation presume to assert of himself or of another that he is the head, since it is said truly, Ecclesiasticus 9, that "no one knows, so far as predestination goes, whether one is worthy of love or hatred."

Likewise, if we examine in the light of the feeling and influence with which we influence inferiors and, on the other hand, examine by the mirror of Scripture, according to which we should regulate our whole life, then we would choose rather to be called servants and ministers of the church than its heads. For it is certain that if we do not fulfil the office of a head, we are not heads, as Augustine, *de decem chordis* [Migne's ed., 38 : 75-91], says: that a perverse husband is not the head of his wife, much less is a prelate

of the church, who alone from God could have a dignity of this kind, the head of a particular church in case he fall away from Christ.

Therefore, after Augustine has shown that a truly Christian wife ought to mourn over the fornication of her husband, not for carnal reasons, but out of love and for the chastity due to the man Christ — he says consequentially that Christ speaks in the hearts of good women, where the husband does not hear, and he goes on to say: "Mourn over the injuries done by thy husband, but do not imitate them that he may rather imitate you in that which is good. For in that wherein he does wrong, do not regard him as thy head but me, thy Lord." And he proves that this ought to be the case and says: "If he is the head in that wherein he does wrong and the body follow its head, they both go over the precipice. But that the Christian may not follow this bad head, let him keep himself to the head of the church, Christ, to whom he owes his chastity, to whom he yields his honor, no longer a single man but now a man wedded to his mother, the church." Blessed, therefore, be the head of the church, Christ, who cannot be separated from his bride which is his mystical body, as the popes have often been separated from the church by heresy.

But some of the aforesaid doctors say that the pope is the bodily head of the church militant and this head ought always to be here with the church, but in this sense Christ is not the bodily head. Here is meant that the same difficulty remains, namely, that they prove the first part of the statement. For it remains for them to prove that the pope is the head of holy church, a thing they have not proved. And, before that, it remains for them to prove that Christ is not the bodily head of the church militant, inasmuch as Christ is a bodily person, because the man who is the head of the church militant, who is Christ, is present through all time with his church unto the consummation of the age, in virtue of his divine personality. Similarly, he is present by grace, giving his body to the church to be eaten in a sacramental and spiritual way. Wherefore, is not that bridegroom, who is the head of the church, much more present with us than the pope, who is removed from us two thousand miles and incapable of influencing of himself our feeling or movements? Let it suffice, therefore, to say, that the pope may be the vicar of Christ and may be so to his profit, if he is a faithful minister predestinated unto the glory of the head, Jesus Christ.

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