

GREGORY THE GREAT AND THE SIXTH-CENTURY DISPUTE OVER THE ECUMENICAL TITLE

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The article explores the showdown between Pope Gregory I and Patriarch John IV of Constantinople over the ecumenical title. It argues that the promotion of the title coincided with other Eastern challenges to Roman prestige and that Gregory's diplomatic strategies evolved over the course of the controversy. While nothing in his correspondence suggests that he would endorse subsequent claims to universal Roman privilege, Eastern intransigence pushed the pontiff to embrace the rhetorical claims of Petrine privilege.

NEARLY EVERY OBSERVER of the Eastern Orthodox/Roman Catholic dialogue recognizes that the most significant obstacle to reunion is ecclesiological in nature, namely, the role of the Roman pontiff with respect to the broader church.¹ Given the importance of tradition for both communions, it seems certain that an agreement on this issue would require a return to an ecclesiological practice rooted in the early church. But that begs the question, What was the role of the bishop of Rome in the broader church before the rise of the medieval papacy and the collapse of Byzantium? Even in the period between the conversion of Constantine

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¹ For confirmation, one need look no further than the reaction in Constantinople to Pope Benedict XVI's decision to drop the title "Patriarch of West" but maintain the more universal titles of "Vicar of Christ" and "Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church." A portion of the official response posted on the Web site of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople, dated June 8, 2006, reads: "by retaining these titles and discarding the 'Patriarch of the West' the term and concept of 'sister Churches' between the Roman-Catholic and Orthodox Church becomes hard to use." The entire response was removed from the official Web site prior to October 2008.

(ca. AD 313) and the coronation of Charlemagne (AD 800) when the majority of Christians confessed a common creed and ostensibly belonged to a single empire, Christians held different views about the authority of Rome in the universal church.² This article examines one of the most important but least scrutinized cases in point, the dispute between Gregory the Great (bishop of Rome, 590–604) and John IV the Faster (bishop of Constantinople, 582–595) over the latter's use of the title "Ecumenical Patriarch."³

While many scholars (and modern apologists⁴) of early medieval Christianity are familiar with the controversy and Gregory's famous assertion that no bishop (the pope included) has universal authority, previous examinations have not appreciated the nuances of Gregory's thought or his strategic shifts

² For a recent look at the ecumenical and scholarly discussion of Petrine primacy in the early church, see Cardinal Walter Kasper, ed., *The Petrine Ministry: Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue*, trans. the staff of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (New York: Newman, 2006). See also John Meyendorff, ed., *The Primacy of Peter* (1963; repr. Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1992).

³ The only article-length studies of the past 100 years are: André Tuilier, "Grégoire le grand et le titre de patriarche oecuménique," in *Grégoire le grand: [Colloque tenu] Chantilly, Centre culturel Les Fontaines, 15–19 septembre 1982: Actes*, ed. Jacques Fontaine, Robert Gillet, and Stan Pellistrandi (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1986) 69–82; Tuilier, "Le sens de l'adjectif 'oecuménique' dans la tradition patristique et dans la tradition byzantine," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 86 (1964) 260–71; Vitalien Laurent, "Le titre de patriarche oecuménique et la signature patriarcale," *Revue des études byzantines* 6 (1948) 5–26; and Siméon Vailhé, "Le titre de Patriarche Oecuménique avant saint Grégoire le Grand," and "Saint Grégoire le Grand et le titre de Patriarche oecuménique," *Echos d'Orient* 11 (1908) 65–69, 161–71. The subject is also discussed in passing by John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1989) 304–7; Robert Markus, "Gregory the Great's Europe," *Royal Historical Society* 31 (1981) 21–36, at 30–31; Jeffrey Richards, *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) 217–21; and Francis Dvornik, *Byzantium and the Roman Primacy*, trans. E. Quain (New York: Fordham University, 1966) 79–81.

⁴ The controversy continues to arm modern apologists in the primacy war: from an Eastern perspective, Gregory, one of the most "Orthodox" popes in history, provides a concise condemnation of papal authority; from a Roman perspective, the machinations of the emperor and his patriarch characterize Byzantine arrogance and display the deficiencies of caesaropapism. See, for example, Gregorio Cognetti, "The Pope Who Condemned Primacy," *Christian Activist: A Journal of Orthodox Opinion* 4 (1994) 4–5. For an equally biased Roman view, see Walter Ullman, *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages*, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1970) 36–7. To be sure, neither view accurately reflects the complexities of the situation at the close of the sixth century. Historically, Gregory was one of the most popular popes in the East. He is the only Latin Father to have had his writings translated into Greek during his lifetime and, perhaps as the ultimate sign of his popularity, he was thought by the later Byzantines to have authored the *Pre-Sanctified Liturgy*.

in policy during the crisis with the East. Indeed, Gregory's reaction to the title was not static, nor was it developed in a vacuum. Moreover, most commentators seem to ignore the fact that it was Eastern intransigence, both imperial and patriarchal, that likely compelled Gregory later in his career to assert more fully the Roman claim to Petrine authority. To understand Gregory's thinking on the subject and to appreciate the equally compelling but divergent concerns of many churchmen of his day, both Greek and Latin, it is necessary to appreciate the tension between two of Gregory's ecclesiological principles: (1) that the preeminence of Peter passed to subsequent bishops of Rome, and (2) that individual bishops who confessed the apostolic faith were autonomous leaders of their own communities. Though Gregory never abandoned either of these positions, he became increasingly willing to appeal to the authority of Peter in his bid to check what he believed was the unprecedented ambition of the see of Constantinople.

THE CONTROVERSY

Although it may be that no one in the papal office was familiar with Constantinople's use of the title "ecumenical patriarch" before the 580s, its association with the patriarch of the Eastern capital went back to at least the year 518.⁵ In that year, a letter from the clergy in Antioch addressed John II of Constantinople as ἅγιος ἀρχιεπίσκοπος καὶ οἰκουμενικός πατριάρχης (holy archbishop and ecumenical patriarch).⁶ In the same year, two regional synods also referred to John as "ecumenical patriarch."⁷

The patriarch's connection to the title was certainly reinforced when it was included in the Justinianic legislation of the 530s. For example, the first mention of Ehipanios (bishop of Constantinople, 520–535) in the *Codex* (a codification of prior Roman laws) identifies him as *sanctissimo et beatissimo archiepiscopo huius regiae urbis et oecumenico patriarchae* (the very holy and blessed archbishop of this royal city and ecumenical patriarch).⁸ The title featured prominently in the *Novellae* (new laws) issued by Justinian and his successors. Nine of the 134 *Novellae* issued during Justinian's reign were addressed to the patriarch of Constantinople and included the title, often in the form ἀρχιεπίσκοπος τῆς

⁵ Prior to this, the title, or variations of it, were applied to other bishops. For example, at the "robber" synod of Ephesus in 449, Olympias of Evazensis referred to Dioscorus of Alexandria as "*sanctissimus pater noster et universalis archiepiscopus*" (J. D. Mansi, ed., *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, 31 vols. [Venice: Antonium Zatta, 1759–1798] 6:855). For a survey of the earliest uses of the title, see Vailhé, "Le titre de patriarche oecuménique" 66–67.

⁶ Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum* 8:1038. ⁷ *Ibid.* 8:1042, 1058–59.

⁸ *Codex Justinianus* 1.1.7. A similar proclamation is affirmed in 1.4.34. Paulus Krueger, ed., *Corpus juris civilis*, vol. 2, *Codex Justinianus* (Berlin: Weidmannos, 1929).

βασιλίδας ταύτης πόλεως καὶ οἰκουμενικός πατριάρχης (archbishop of this capital city and ecumenical patriarch).⁹ The phrase οἰκουμενικός πατριάρχης was explicitly affirmed in the text of *Novella* 58 and *Novella* 83. Unlike the *Codex*, which was produced primarily in Latin, the *Novellae* were, for the most part, issued in Greek or bilingually.¹⁰ As I will show later, the fact that the Greek phrase οἰκουμενικός πατριάρχης in the *Novellae* was typically translated into Latin as *universalis patriarches* is of extreme significance.¹¹

It is likely that the title was initially used honorifically by persons addressing the patriarch. There is no evidence that, prior to John IV, the patriarchs of Constantinople used it to refer to themselves.¹² In 588, however, Pope Pelagius II (579–590) received a letter from John in which the patriarch appended the title as part of his signature. The epistle also included the acts of a Constantinopolitan synod of the previous year, which had investigated certain charges against the patriarch of Antioch. These acts affirmed that the synod had also identified John as the ecumenical patriarch. Pelagius viewed the title as an unwarranted assertion of Constantinopolitan authority.¹³ According to Pope Gregory I, who recounted the events years later, Pelagius, “on the authority of the holy apostle Peter,” dispatched a series of letters annulling the section of the synodal acts that had affirmed the title.¹⁴ He also ordered his legate in the capital to cease communion with John until the patriarch relinquished the title.¹⁵

⁹ See, for example, the subtitles for *Novellae* 3, 5, 6, 7, 16, 42, 55, 56, and 77. Rudolfus Schoell and Guilelmus Kroll, eds., *Corpus juris civilis*, vol. 3, *Novellae* (Berlin: Weidmannos, 1928). Literally βασιλὶς πόλις means “queen city”—Constantinople was often identified as the queen city of the empire. G. W. H. Lampe, not surprisingly, suggests “capital city” (*A Patristic Greek Lexicon* 293).

¹⁰ Latin translations of the Greek *Novellae* appeared almost immediately for the purpose of training legal students who lacked proficiency in Greek. These translations were likely widely available in Rome by the close of the sixth century. See the preface to the critical edition by Schoell and Kroll, *Corpus juris civilis*, vol. 3, *Novellae* iii–xvi. See also, P. Weimar, “Corpus iuris civilis,” in *Lexikon des Mittelalters* 3: 272–73; and Detlef Liebs, “Roman Law” in *Cambridge Ancient History* 14: 251–52. For a recent assessment of the problems historians face when mining Roman legal records, see John Matthews, *Laying Down the Law: A Study of the Theodosian Code* (New Haven: Yale University, 2000).

¹¹ By contrast, the compilers of the *Codex* had chosen to transliterate the Greek word οἰκουμενικός as *oecumenicus* rather than translate it.

¹² On the various titles claimed by the patriarchs of Constantinople by their signatures, see Laurent, “Le titre de patriarche oecuménique.”

¹³ Pelagius, Ep. 6 (PL 69, 399–400).

¹⁴ Gregory, Ep. 5.41 (all references to Gregory’s letters stem from Dag Norberg, ed., *S. Gregorii Magni registrum epistularum*, Corpus Christianorum, series Latina 140–140a; Turnholti: Brepols, 1982); translations are mine.

¹⁵ Gregory, Ep. 5.41.

By the time Gregory succeeded Pelagius as pope in September 590, it had become customary for a member of the *pentarchy* (i.e., the bishops of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem) to send to the other members a synodal letter that included a confession of faith.¹⁶ Gregory's synodal letter made no mention of the controversy,¹⁷ perhaps because Gregory had served for several years (578–584) as papal legate to the emperor in Constantinople and had cultivated a friendship with John during that time. Possibly Gregory hoped to use his good relations with John and therefore suspended judgment on the matter until later.¹⁸ Whether or not that is true, events in the East forced his hand. At some point near the beginning of Gregory's tenure as pope, two Eastern clerics—John, a priest from Chalcedon, and Athanasius, a priest-monk from Isauria—were found guilty of heresy by another local synod in Constantinople. Both clerics traveled to Rome to appeal their case before Gregory.¹⁹ Gregory agreed to intervene and, through his legate in Constantinople, Sabinianus, attempted to solicit from John the acts of the trial and an explanation of what had transpired.²⁰

¹⁶ Building upon the provincial jurisdictional privileges granted to certain “supra”-metropolitan sees by the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, Emperor Justinian organized the administration of the church into five autocephalous sees, known as the *pentarchy*, each led by a patriarch. The five sees were Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. *Novellae* 109, 123, and 131. The distribution of power into five sees was not well received in Rome because many Roman churchmen saw it as a loss of prestige for the apostolic see. For more on the pentarchy and Rome's reception, see Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity* 54–66.

¹⁷ Gregory, Ep. 1.24. Gregory added Anastasius, the ex-patriarch of Antioch, as an additional recipient of this letter.

¹⁸ Markus suggests an alternate interpretation, namely, that Gregory maintained an unbroken, though not written, critique of John's use of the title, which was in continuity with Pelagius's criticisms. See Markus, “Gregory the Great's Europe” 31.

¹⁹ The regional synod of Sardica in 343 established a precedent for accused clerics to appeal their cases to Rome. If he accepted the appeal, the bishop of Rome was to supervise a new trial to take place where the cleric was initially condemned and before bishops of that region. With time, the Roman Church established itself as the actual court of appeal. See Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity* 59–62. Justinian's *Novella* 123, dated to May of 546, countered this practice by affirming that each patriarchate served as its own court of last appeal for clerics condemned by lower courts within their superjurisdiction. The law does not envision an appellate system between the patriarchates and there is no special mention of Rome in this context. Book 4 of Gregory's *Dialogues* confirms that Athanasius was in Rome by the summer of 593. The pope even includes in the text a miracle story told him by Athanasius. See Gregory, *Dialogues* 4.38 (PL 77, 393B).

²⁰ There is no direct record of Gregory's request to John. Most likely, Sabinianus conveyed the request to John orally. It is also possible, however, that he had sent an unrecorded letter, which would explain his later statement that he had sent several

John responded to Gregory's inquiries by claiming that he had no knowledge of the case—an assertion that was not well received in Rome.²¹ So in July 593, Gregory reproached John's intransigence. According to Gregory, John was either ignorant of what was taking place in his own church, or he was dismissing the request in a bid to assert his sovereignty. If the former was true, then the patriarch was unfit for office; if the latter was true, which is what Gregory suspected, then it confirmed the pope's suspicions that his friend had let the corruptive power of episcopal office get the better of him. From Gregory's perspective, the accused clerics deserved a fresh trial; if John was not going to provide one, then it was within the pope's jurisdiction to conduct it himself in Rome.²² It is worth noting that this letter of 593 does not explicitly address John's use of the ecumenical title. Nevertheless, Gregory's multiple allegations concerning John's "uncanonical behavior" likely refer to more than Athanasius's claim that he had been flogged during his trial in Constantinople.²³ Moreover, it is clear that Gregory's subsequent attacks on John's use of the title were directly related to the patriarch's mishandling of the trial of these two clerics.

Later letters inform us that Gregory then instructed Sabinianus to speak to both John and the emperor, Maurice, about the patriarch's use of the ecumenical title.²⁴ But Sabinianus's embassy failed. John soon dispatched the requested documents to Rome but asserted the ecumenical title, according to Gregory, "on nearly every line."²⁵ Worse still, the emperor ordered the pope to "make peace with his brother and fellow-bishop John."²⁶ Gregory blamed Sabinianus for the breakdown in diplomacy and eventually had him transferred out of Constantinople.²⁷

scripta (not *epistulae*) to John. Ecclesiastic letter-writing at this time followed a number of diplomatic protocols. In the papal scriptorium, it was customary for the secretarial corps to make two copies of a letter, one went to the recipient, the other to the archives. On certain occasions, however, the delicacy of a particular issue might dictate that no second letter was kept for posterity. We know that Gregory screened letters in this way; we also know that for the most delicate matters, he committed nothing to writing but rather instructed his agents to convey oral requests on the pontiff's behalf. See Markus, "Gregory the Great's Europe" 30–32.

²¹ Gregory, Ep. 3.52. Unfortunately, all of John's letters to Gregory are lost.

²² Gregory, Ep. 3.52.

²³ Gregory informs John that the Roman legate will speak to him about all these delicate matters. Gregory, Ep. 3.52. Gregory also mentions John's uncanonical behavior in a letter (Ep. 3.63) to Narses, a friend and high-ranking imperial diplomat.

²⁴ Gregory, Ep. 5.39.

²⁵ Gregory, Ep. 5.45.

²⁶ See Gregory, Ep. 5.39.

²⁷ In Ep. 5.45 Gregory reveals his displeasure. Anatolius, Sabinianus's replacement, was in Constantinople by June of 597.

In the meantime, he affirmed previous instructions that Sabinianus was not to celebrate the Divine Liturgy with John unless the patriarch relented.²⁸

It is important to realize that John's promotion of the title was not the only thing in the East concerning Gregory at this time. Indeed, if we are to understand why Gregory responded as he did and appreciate the evolutions in his thinking on the matter, we cannot isolate this controversy from other political and ecclesiological developments that increasingly brought Rome and the East into conflict at the close of the sixth century. And, while this is not the place to recount the history of the Roman See in the Byzantine empire, it is necessary to explore at least two additional situations that bore directly on Gregory's attitude toward the East in the spring and summer of 595.

First, we should not underestimate the impact of the fragmented political situation in Italy.²⁹ For much of the sixth century, the Italian peninsula was a war zone. Justinian's costly bid to reclaim the peninsula from the Goths in the middle of the century had left most of central Italy in a shambles; war, plague, and famine all took a toll. The situation only worsened when the Lombards crossed the Alps in 568.³⁰ Early in Gregory's pontificate, the Lombards besieged Rome. Lacking imperial support, it fell to Gregory to address the city's defenses.³¹ When he managed to negotiate an armistice with the invaders early in 595, the Byzantine Exarch in Ravenna summarily accused him of treason, and the emperor subsequently characterized him as a diplomatic fool.³² Though he always remained loyal to the court in Constantinople, Gregory increasingly felt as though the needs of the Roman people were of little concern to leaders in the East.³³

At the same time, Roman ecclesiastic jurisdiction was being threatened in the Balkans. The Archbishopric of Salona, on the Western coast of modern-day Croatia, had long been subordinate to the See of Rome and was the home

²⁸ Ibid. There is no other record of these previous instructions.

²⁹ For an overview, see Jeffrey Richards, *The Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages, 476–752* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979) 139–200.

³⁰ By mid-eighth century, the Lombards would isolate Rome from the Byzantine stronghold in Ravenna and become permanent players in local and ecclesiastic politics.

³¹ See Peter Iver Kaufman, *Church, Book, and Bishop: Conflict and Authority in Early Latin Christianity* (Boulder: Westview, 1996) 121–22.

³² Gregory, Ep. 5.36. See R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (New York: Cambridge University, 1997) 97–107. As Meyendorff has observed, Gregory's policy was effective and was eventually embraced by the leaders in Ravenna and Constantinople. See Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity* 303–4.

³³ For more on Gregory's self-identification as a loyal member of the empire, see Markus, *Gregory the Great* 83–111.

to a small patrimony of farms that helped to sustain the Roman Church.³⁴ When its bishop died in 593 the succession resulted in a contested election between a Roman candidate, Honoratus, and another candidate, Maximus.³⁵ By April 594, Maximus had been installed with the help of imperial troops and, in the confusion that followed, Gregory's legate to the region had to flee for his life.³⁶ Clearly, Maximus had won the support of the imperial court, and there is no reason to doubt that he had the approval of the patriarch of Constantinople. Gregory, of course, complained to the emperor and others that Maximus had in effect purchased his office (which the pope found especially loathsome) and that he had been elected without Rome's approval.³⁷ Despite his protests, however, the emperor was unmoved. From Gregory's perspective, both the pretender in Salona and the court in Constantinople were denying Roman jurisdiction in the Balkans.³⁸ These events further confirmed Gregory's sense that Maurice and John were acting as they pleased, with little respect for Roman sovereignty or traditional jurisdictions. All three of these elements—criticism of the Lombard armistice, the usurpation of the see of Salona, and the promotion of the ecumenical title—came to a head by the summer of 595. Realizing that imperial sympathies for Italian interests were waning and knowing that his own reputation in the capital was in decline, Gregory chose to make his stand.³⁹

On June 1, 595, Gregory dispatched a series of letters to the East. They contain his oldest surviving record of why he found the ecumenical title to be so offensive. Three of these letters are especially important: Ep. 5.37 to

³⁴ See Richards, *Popes and the Papacy* 317–18. As Brian Daley notes, Roman ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the region was not continuous. Theodosius II transferred the district to the care of the bishop of Constantinople in 421. Honorius, Theodosius's Western counterpart, restored it to Roman jurisdiction, but Eastern emperors and patriarchs continued to view the area as belonging to Constantinople's superjurisdiction. See Brian E. Daley, "Position and Patronage in the Early Church: The Original Meaning of 'Primacy of Honour,'" *Journal of Theological Studies* ns. 44 (1993) 529–53, at 539.

³⁵ The former bishop actually died in Rome, where he had been convicted of various crimes. The rumor in Constantinople was that Gregory had ordered his murder. See Gregory, Ep. 5.6.

³⁶ Gregory, Epp. 4.20, 5.6, and 5.39. It would take at least four years before relations between Gregory and Maximus would normalize. See Richards, *Popes and the Papacy* 317–18, and *Consul of God* 201–7.

³⁷ See, especially, Gregory, Epp. 5.6 and 5.39.

³⁸ In the months that followed, Gregory demanded that Maximus come to Rome so that the matter could be resolved. A letter from Maximus, now lost, apparently responded that the emperor had ordered the case to be heard in Salona, not Rome—a telling rejection of Gregory's authority in the region. See Gregory, Epp. 6.3 and 6.25.

³⁹ Ep. 7.30 well conveys Gregory's concern that the court was losing patience with him.

the emperor; Ep. 5.41 to Eulogius of Alexandria and Anastasius of Antioch; and Ep. 5.44 to John himself. Although the letters repeat several of Gregory's arguments, each letter is customized for its addressee. For example, the epistle to the emperor warns that John's pretensions threaten the stability of the empire, thus suggesting that it is a political, not just an ecclesiological, matter. The letter to the patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch argues that John's impudence undermines their own episcopal authority. And to the patriarch himself, a man renowned for ascetic disciplines, Gregory cautions that ascetic detachment is of little value to someone who has fallen victim to pride.

Key to understanding Gregory's stated rejection of the title is the fact that he, like the Latin translators of Justinian's *Novellae*, took the Greek word οἰκουμενικός to mean "universal"—*universalis* in Latin.⁴⁰ According to Gregory, this meant that John was proclaiming that he was, in effect, the "only bishop," implying that all other bishops received their authority through him.⁴¹ Gregory fundamentally opposed that claim, not just for the bishop of Constantinople but for any bishop, including the bishop of Rome. In one of the more illuminating passages of his letter to John, Gregory writes: "Certainly Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, himself was but a member of the holy and universal church; Paul, Andrew, John—what were they but the heads of individual communities? Were not all [the apostles] members under one head [i.e., Christ]?"⁴² While it is easy to find in this passage the subsequent Byzantine argument against later claims of Roman supremacy, it is equally important to see this passage as the rhetorical basis for Gregory's public diplomacy.

Any student of Gregory's corpus knows that he consistently railed against clerics who succumbed to pride. From his perspective, the ecumenical title suggested that John had done precisely that. Gregory, steeped as he was in the ascetic pastoral tradition, understood pride to be the worst of the vices. In his *Morals on the Book of Job*, a 2500-page exegesis of the Old Testament book, Gregory had argued that pride was the "mother" or "source" of all the passions—it was impossible for anyone who fell victim

⁴⁰ Another example of translating οἰκουμενικός as *universalis* prior to Gregory's tenure comes from Facundus of Hermiane, whose *Pro defensione trium capitulorum* (ca. 550) referred to the bishop of Constantinople as *santissimus ac beatissimus archiepiscopus regiae urbis hujus et universalis patriarchae* (PL 67.561).

⁴¹ Note, for example, Gregory's assertion to the emperor (Ep. 5.37) that John is claiming the honor of all priests for himself (*sed absit a christianis cordibus nomen istud blasphemiae, in quo omnium sacerdotum honor adimitur, dum ab uno sibi dementer arrogatur*). In another example (Ep. 5.44 to John) Gregory argues that all bishops of the universal church are like the stars of the sky, but John's promotion of the ecumenical title suggests that he will ascend alone to heaven and trample upon the others in the process.

⁴² Gregory, Ep. 5.44.

to pride to offer effective spiritual direction.⁴³ Although John was renowned for his ascetic discipline—hence the epithet “the Faster,” Gregory warned the patriarch that he would be unable to administer his see effectively and would risk his own salvation if he did not abandon the pretentious title.⁴⁴

Gregory also built his case on biblical and canonical precedent. In this first round of letters, Gregory examined Peter’s role among the apostles as depicted in Scripture, in order to debunk the notion that any one bishop could be called universal. Writing to the emperor, Gregory submits: “Behold, [Peter] received the keys of the heavenly kingdom, he was granted the power to bind and loose, and the care and authority [*principatus*] of the entire church was committed to him, and yet even he is not called the universal apostle.”⁴⁵ In other words, if the title was too grand for Peter, it was certainly too grand for the current patriarch of Constantinople—a see that, in Gregory’s era, made no claim to apostolicity (the Constantinopolitan identification with St. Andrew was not popularized until the following century).⁴⁶

In the same letter to the emperor, the pontiff notes that the fathers of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 had attempted to extend the title to Leo, then bishop of Rome. Gregory notes, however, that “no pope has ever consented to this title of singularity because if [this honor] is given to one individually, the honor that is due to all priests universally is undermined.”⁴⁷ He continues, “How is it then, that we [the bishops of Rome] do not seek this name of glory, even when it is offered, and another presumes to take it for himself, even though it has never been offered to him?”⁴⁸ According to Gregory, a true spiritual leader shuns all vestiges of honor—a maxim to which he personally conformed by styling himself “servant of the servants of God.”⁴⁹ But John’s desire to promote himself as the universal bishop indicated to Gregory that his friend had fallen victim to pride.

⁴³ Gregory, *Moralia in Job* 31.45.87, Corpus Christianorum, series Latina 143b, ed. M. Adriaen (Turnholt: Brepols, 1985). In 15 different chapters of his *Book of Pastoral Rule*, Gregory identifies pride as an obstacle to effective ministry, thereby devoting considerably more attention to it than to any of the other vices.

⁴⁴ Gregory, Ep. 5.44.

⁴⁵ Gregory, Ep. 5.37.

⁴⁶ In the years after the Council of Chalcedon, Pope Leo I, when he wrote to both patriarch and emperor to defend his rejection of the council’s canon 28, exploited the belief that Constantinople was not an apostolic see. See Daley, “Position and Patronage” 548–49; and Francis Dvornik, *The Idea of Apostolicity in Byzantium and the Legend of the Apostle St. Andrew* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1958) 97–98.

⁴⁷ Gregory, Ep. 5.37.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Gregory offers the same argument in Epp. 5.41 and 8.29.

⁴⁹ Gregory, Ep. 1.41.

Although evidence indicates that Leo, though not present, was affirmed as the “ecumenical patriarch” during the discussions at Chalcedon, the Roman accounts of the council differed from those held by other churches.⁵⁰ Most notably, Leo and subsequent pontiffs had refused to acknowledge the 28th canon of Chalcedon, which had accorded the see of Constantinople “equal prerogatives” with elder Rome and assigned her second rank.⁵¹ Gregory is aware that the Roman records are different from the Greek accounts, and he seems to know why. In fact, it was likely from a study of Leo I’s rejection of the 28th canon of Chalcedon that Gregory would later draw the argument that Alexandria and Antioch, like Rome, were uniquely connected to Peter and therefore possessed a certain status greater than other sees.⁵² Elsewhere, Gregory asserted that the manuscripts preserved in Constantinople could not be trusted, in part because too many of its leaders had succumbed to heresy.⁵³

One of Gregory’s most rhetorically striking arguments in his initial barrage against John’s use of the title was that the see of Constantinople had produced so many heretics.⁵⁴ Making the case to the emperor (and later to the other patriarchs), Gregory argues that John’s claim to universal authority is all the more disturbing because of Constantinople’s lack of consistent fidelity to the apostolic faith.⁵⁵ In short, Gregory asks, can the patriarch of Constantinople have universal authority if so many of its

⁵⁰ At the Council of Chalcedon a deacon of the Alexandrian church is reported to have referred to Pope Leo I as the “archbishop and ecumenical patriarch of Rome.” See Mansi, *Encyclopédie* 6:1005. Subsequent popes, Hormisdas and Agapitus, were likewise acknowledged by Eastern bishops as “ecumenical patriarchs” See *ibid.* 8:425, 895.

⁵¹ Norman Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (Washington: Sheed & Ward, 1990) 1:99–100. This canon confirmed the third canon of the Council of Constantinople (381), which had also been dismissed in Rome and Alexandria. For a summary of the reasons that Leo objected to Constantinople’s rise, see Daley, “Position and Patronage,” 547–49.

⁵² Leo, Ep. 106 (PL 54.1001–9). Prior to Leo, Pope Innocent I (401–417) had defended the expansion of the authority of the see of Antioch in the East on the grounds that it had been founded by Peter. See also Innocent I, Ep. 24 (PL 20.546–50) and Dvornik, *Idea of Apostolicity* 14–15.

⁵³ See, for example, Gregory, Ep. 6.14, which suggests that Constantinopolitan editors had added to the acts of the Council of Chalcedon.

⁵⁴ Gregory, Epp. 5.37 and 7.24.

⁵⁵ Contrary to Tuilier’s argument, Gregory’s rejection of John’s claim does not seem to have stemmed from concern over John’s personal orthodoxy. Rather, Gregory’s point is that prior Constantinopolitan heresies demonstrate that the institution of the see of Constantinople cannot adequately serve as the head of the universal church. See Tuilier, “Grégoire le Grand et le titre de patriarche oecuménique” 73.

leaders had not only succumbed to heresy but had actually been originators of heresy?⁵⁶

It would seem, however, that Gregory's most effective theological argument and the one that continues to have the greatest theological meaning for the present Roman Catholic/Eastern Orthodox dialogue is that calling one bishop "universal" undermines the dignity of all other bishops. Here, Gregory is not so much defending the Roman *principatus* as he is affirming the dignity of all members of the episcopal office. In keeping with Justinian's legislation that set the institutional framework for the governance of the church, Gregory held to the administrative hierarchy within the episcopal ranks, which placed patriarchs ahead of metropolitans, metropolitans ahead of diocesan bishops, and diocesan bishops ahead of auxiliary bishops.⁵⁷ According to Gregory, however, one's administrative rank did not impact his sacramental, instructional, or pastoral autonomy within his episcopal see. In these important ways, all bishops were equal, all could bind and loose, and all had the pastoral responsibility to advance the spiritual condition of those in their care.⁵⁸ John's claim to be the universal bishop, however, undermined that equality because it implied that individual bishops received their authority from John rather than from Christ.

The pope soon learned that his initial flurry of letters in the summer of 595 did little to deter the patriarch's use of the title or the emperor's support for him. In September 595, Gregory vindicated John of Chalcedon of all charges of heresy, noting that the ruling had not been his decision alone, but was the consensus of a Roman synod, which had carefully examined the records of the initial trial in Constantinople.⁵⁹ Nearly a year later he absolved Athanasius, after the monk agreed to denounce a book found in his possession that contained Manichean teachings.⁶⁰

During this same period John IV died in Constantinople and was replaced by Cyriacus, another man Gregory had known during his time in the capital. Upon the receipt of Cyriacus's synodal letter announcing his election, which included the title, Gregory dispatched two missives. The

⁵⁶ Gregory, Ep. 5.37.

⁵⁷ Gregory's correspondence suggests that he found that administrative rank was most important in cases of disputed clerical elections. It also contributed to the determination of who, within Gregory's immediate sphere of influence, was qualified to receive the pallium.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Gregory's letter to Romanus (Ep. 11.24) his *rector* of the papal patrimony in Syracuse, in which Gregory affirms the rights of individual bishops against the pretensions of papal agents. For an examination of Gregory's understanding of spiritual leadership, see George Demacopoulos, *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2007) 127–64.

⁵⁹ Concerning Gregory's working through a synod, see Epp. 6.15, 6.16, and 6.17.

⁶⁰ Gregory, Epp. 6.65 and 7.4.

first was a *pro forma* acknowledgement of Cyriacus's appointment.⁶¹ The second, however, was a lengthy examination of the challenges of pastoral leadership, a subject close to Gregory's heart. Years earlier, the pontiff had authored one of the most important treatises of pastoral literature of the patristic age, *Book of Pastoral Rule*, and had spent the intervening years fine-tuning his ideas. Gregory's letter encouraged Cyriacus to seek the elusive balance between personal contemplation and the service of others, reminding the new patriarch that the most qualified candidates for episcopal office were those who, like Cyriacus, tried to avoid the office.⁶² The letter then made a play on Cyriacus's confession of a "mutual faith" by asserting that such a goal requires a "mutual peace of heart"—but this "peace of heart" required Cyriacus's rejection of the "pride of a profane name."⁶³ Gregory, rather carefully, made no direct mention of whether Cyriacus had employed the offensive title in his synodal letter, though he states elsewhere that Cyriacus had done so.⁶⁴

More deflating than Cyriacus's adoption of John's pretentious title, however, was the lack of support Gregory received from others. Emperor Maurice continued to rebuff the pope's concern for the matter, insulting him at one point by noting that Gregory was acting "indiscreetly."⁶⁵ Dismissing the matter entirely, Maurice simply ordered the pontiff to remain in communion with Cyriacus.⁶⁶ Gregory fared no better with Anastasius, the patriarch of Antioch, who, in effect, told him that the title was a non-issue and that he should drop it.⁶⁷ Perhaps even more offensive was the fact that by the summer of 596, Patriarch Eulogius of Alexandria had not even bothered to respond to Gregory's lengthy letter of 595. Exasperated, the pope mounted the maximum pressure he could within the limits of episcopal dignity, noting:

There is something that binds us in a unique way to the Alexandrian Church and compels us in a special way to love it. For as everyone knows, the blessed Evangelist Mark was sent to Alexandria by his teacher Peter; and so we are bound by this unity of teacher and disciple to the extent that it appears that I am to preside over the see of the disciple in accord with [my relationship to] the teacher, and you are to preside over the see of the master in accordance with [your relationship to] the disciple.⁶⁸

⁶¹ Gregory, Ep. 7.4.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Instead, Gregory makes a veiled reference to Cyriacus's need to purge himself of all sin. In Ep. 7.24 to Anastasius of Antioch, Gregory notes that he did not reprimand Cyriacus for his synodal letter, but rather waited until a subsequent letter to reproach the patriarch for his use of the title.

⁶⁵ Gregory, Ep. 7.30.

⁶⁶ Ibid. Specifically, Maurice ordered Gregory to receive Cyriacus's ambassadors.

⁶⁷ Gregory, Ep. 7.24.

⁶² Gregory, Ep. 7.5.

⁶⁸ Gregory, Ep. 6.61.

Certainly Gregory had no intention of sharing his see with Eulogius. But his meaning was unmistakable: Eulogius was to respond to letters sent from Rome.

By this point, it had become clear to Gregory that he was fighting a losing battle. It was unlikely that the emperor would ever support his cause, and it must have appeared to the pontiff that his opportunity to convince the patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch was also slipping from his grasp. Despite his previous threats to do so, he could not bring himself to initiate schism with Constantinople. So Gregory increased the rhetorical pressure and tried one last time to solicit the patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch to support his cause. In June 597, Gregory told Anastasius of Antioch that the title was the invention of the devil, a charge he would repeat in subsequent letters.⁶⁹ He also reinforced an older line of argument that he had not fully developed, that calling one bishop universal links the fate of the universal church to a single man. But if that man falls, as anyone can, then the universal church falls with him. From Gregory's perspective, this was an untenable position not only because the fate of the church could not be linked to a single individual but also because such a claim compromised the autonomy of individual bishops.⁷⁰

A month later, Gregory offered the most pronounced assertion of Petrine authority in his entire corpus. Eulogius had finally responded to Gregory about the question at hand.⁷¹ In doing so, the patriarch of Alexandria had embraced the long-standing Roman assertion that Peter continued to sit on his throne in the person of his successors. Acknowledging Eulogius's love for Peter, the pope offered a brief exegesis of Matthew 16 and other select passages because they endorse what was for Gregory a new claim—that the sees of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch are the three most important in the Christian world because they alone have special ties to Peter. Gregory writes:

Therefore, while there are many apostles with respect to preeminence, the see of the Prince of the Apostles has alone become valid in authority, which, in three, is unified as one. For [Peter] exalted the see in which he deigned to rest and complete the present life [i.e., Rome]; he adorned the see to which he sent his disciple, the Evangelist [i.e., Alexandria]; and he established the see in which he sat for seven years, though he would eventually leave it [i.e., Antioch].⁷²

⁶⁹ Gregory, Ep. 7.24. Gregory had previously suggested to Maurice (Ep. 5.39) that John's use of the title was a "sign of the coming of the antichrist." But his letter to the Patriarch of Antioch, which insists that the title is "born of the antichrist," is a stronger condemnation, reflecting a rhetorical escalation.

⁷⁰ Gregory, Ep. 7.24.

⁷¹ None of Eulogius's letters survive.

⁷² Gregory, Ep. 7.37.

While it would be both an exaggeration and an anachronism to suggest that Gregory was asserting a claim to outright Roman supremacy, he was quite consciously linking preeminence among the episcopal body to the Apostle Peter. And by doing so, his intention is clear: he seeks to undermine the authority of Constantinople, which (from Gregory's perspective) is based on imperial, not apostolic, credentials.⁷³ Gregory concludes the letter by acknowledging the various gifts exchanged between Rome and Alexandria. Notably he describes this exchange as a transaction not between Eulogius and himself but between Mark and Peter.⁷⁴ In subsequent years that appeal to apostolic authority became a permanent feature of Gregory's letters to Eulogius.⁷⁵

Two additional developments in the controversy require some attention because they offer the only resolution to the controversy that Gregory would know. The first is the synod of Constantinople, which convened in the year 599. In anticipation of this meeting, Gregory wrote to Eusebius of Thessalonica and six other Eastern bishops warning them not to accept any attempt by Cyriacus or the emperor to have the council affirm the ecumenical title.⁷⁶ It was the first time that Gregory had written to diocesan bishops on the subject; the letter summarizes the entire affair. Not surprisingly, Gregory employs the argument that if one bishop is the universal bishop then all other bishops are deprived of their dignity.⁷⁷ He also notes: "when our predecessor, Pelagius of blessed memory, became aware of all of this, he annulled by an entirely valid censure all the acts of the synod [of 587], except those related to the cause of Gregory, the bishop of Antioch of venerable memory."⁷⁸ Years earlier Pope Gregory had reported the same thing to Eulogius and Anastasius. The difference this time is that Gregory now promises that he will annul the impending council in Constantinople if it confirms the ecumenical title.⁷⁹ This is the strongest assertion of personal privilege in Gregory's corpus, and it belies his previous statements suggesting that synods are more authoritative than individual bishops.⁸⁰ Gregory concludes with further threats that if any one of these seven bishops should approve the title he will be severed from communion with Peter, Prince of the Apostles.⁸¹ We know from subsequent letters

⁷³ Another example of Gregory's acknowledgment of the apostolic credentials of other sees is Ep. 5.42.

⁷⁴ Gregory, Ep. 7.37.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Gregory, Epp. 8.28, 10.14, and 10.21.

⁷⁶ In Ep. 9.157 Gregory even suggests that the synod may have been designed for the explicit purpose of doing so.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ See Gregory, Epp. 6.15, 6.16, and 6.17.

⁸¹ Gregory, Ep. 9.157.

that, despite his concerns, the council did not affirm the title—one of the few victories that Gregory enjoyed during the controversy.

Finally, in August 600, Gregory again wrote to Eulogius, commending him for his work at the aforementioned synod.⁸² Gregory closed the letter with a long lament about the lack of sufficient translators in Rome.⁸³ Similar comments are sprinkled throughout Gregory's corpus, but this particular expression of dismay could be a veiled reference to the fact that Gregory has finally come to accept that the Greek word *οικουμενικός* did not convey the sweeping universalism that he had previously feared. He notes that it was his legate in Constantinople who had informed him of the outcome of the synod of 599. Is it possible that the same legate received a more thorough briefing of the meaning of the term and then communicated it to Gregory?⁸⁴ While there is no direct confirmation of this in the letter to Eulogius or anywhere else in Gregory's correspondence, it is curious that Gregory's campaign against the title essentially came to a close in the year 600, four years and more than 100 letters before his death.⁸⁵

⁸² Gregory, Ep. 10.21.

⁸³ Scholars have speculated on Gregory's knowledge of Greek. The traditional position, represented by Fredrick Dudden and Pierre Riché, is that Gregory did not know Greek. Joan Peterson challenged that conclusion in 1976, arguing that he had a "reading knowledge" of it. In 1986, however, Peterson revised her initial argument, admitting that she had overestimated the extent of Gregory's fluency. I agree with Peter Brown that Gregory's claims of ignorance (in, e.g., Ep. 7.27) are rhetorically motivated and that he did, in fact, possess a limited knowledge of Greek. See Fredrick H. Dudden, *Gregory the Great* (New York: Longmans Green, 1907) 153, 288; Pierre Riché, *Education et culture dans l'occident barbare, Vie-VIIIe siècle*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Seuil, 1973) 189; Joan Petersen, "Did Gregory the Great Know Greek?" in *Orthodox Churches and the West*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976) 121–34; Peterson, "'Homo omnino Latinus'?: The Theological and Cultural Background of Pope Gregory the Great," *Speculum* 62/63 (1987) 529–51; and Peter Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996) 138.

⁸⁴ The lack of support that Gregory received from Antioch (and initially from Alexandria) might suggest that these Greek clerics did not think the title "ecumenical patriarch" threatened or compromised their own authority.

⁸⁵ There is one final mention of the issue in Ep. 13.41 to Cyriacus, where Gregory introduces his new *apocrisarius*, Boniface (later, Pope Boniface III). It is, of course, possible that Gregory was simply acknowledging a losing battle when he wrote to Eulogius in 600. In the previous year, he had acknowledged (see Ep. 9.176) that he was unwilling to be the instigator of schism over the issue. Another possibility is that Gregory had, by the year 600, warmed to the government in Constantinople because of his better relationship with the new exarch in Ravenna. Prolonging the confrontation over the title could have jeopardized this new opportunity to gain imperial support for the pressing matters in Italy.

ΟΙΚΟΥΜΕΝΙΚΟΣ AS *UNIVERSALIS*

Throughout the controversy, Gregory's defense of episcopal sovereignty (in fact the principal basis for his rejection of the ecumenical title) stemmed from his belief that οἰκουμενικός meant *universalis* in Latin, implying that John was claiming to be the "universal" bishop. Some modern commentators have argued that Gregory overreacted because he and his scribes failed to properly understand the term. John Meyendorff, for example, concluded: "St. Gregory shows a surprising misunderstanding of the title's true significance."⁸⁶ Jeffrey Richards similarly dismissed Gregory's interpretation that the title was an attack on Roman primacy.⁸⁷ Yet *universalis* was precisely the word used by the Latin translators of the *Novellae*, which would have been available in Rome by the close of the sixth century. Given that precedent, it should be no surprise that Gregory's office would translate John's οἰκουμενικός as *universalis*; and once it was in Latin, it seems logical, given other Eastern challenges to Gregory's authority at the time, that he would interpret the title as he did.

The question of meaning, however, remains a critical one. Technically, οἰκουμένη means "the inhabited earth." Byzantine political propaganda, drawing from Roman models, understood the borders of the empire to constitute the "inhabited earth." Given this context, it might be possible to understand the adjectival form, οἰκουμενικός, as a synonym for "imperial" because the "inhabited earth" was the empire. But we must also consider that when the Justinianic *Codex* referred to the patriarch of Constantinople it had employed a transliteration of the Greek "οἰκουμενικός": *oecumenicus*. Moreover, when the *Novellae* were translated into Latin, scribes typically rendered "οἰκουμενικός" as *universalis*. Thus, neither the *Codex* nor the Latin *Novellae* employ the most obvious Latin equivalent for imperial: *imperialis*. Which is to say that neither the authors of the *Codex* nor the translators of the *Novellae* sought to exchange "imperial" for "ecumenical."

Given these facts, it seems that there remains at least four ways to interpret the meaning of the claim "ecumenical patriarch" in the context of the late sixth century. The first option is that the title implies some sense of universal Christian jurisdiction, unrelated to the political boundaries of the empire. This would be the most sweeping and presumptuous possibility, and it is the one Gregory often targeted as the unavoidable consequence of consenting to the title. Such a far-reaching interpretation of the term οἰκουμενικός could, of course, be linked to the hallowed

⁸⁶ Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity* 305. Meyendorff believes that the term was initially promoted by the bishops of Constantinople to exploit their "imperial" influence against Monophysite resistance.

⁸⁷ Richards (*Popes and the Papacy* 11) argues that the title meant nothing more than "supreme within his patriarchate." See also, Richards, *Consul of God* 221.

“ecumenical” councils. These synods were considered authoritative precisely because they were believed to represent the universal (i.e., entire) church and because their decisions were considered to be binding both within and beyond the empire.⁸⁸ Given the undisputed authority of the ecumenical councils, attaching the term “ecumenical” to the patriarch’s title could only have bolstered the prestige and authority of the see of Constantinople. It is noteworthy that Gregory, although he clearly affirmed that these synods were dogmatically binding, never described them as *oecumenicus* and only once referred to them as *universalis*.⁸⁹

A second possibility is that the term implied supreme jurisdiction within one’s patriarchate, as *Novella* 123 had prescribed for each patriarch. In other words, the title conveyed authority only within the patriarchate of Constantinople; it did not assert privilege elsewhere. When advocating for this interpretation, Richards points to the fact that the term was employed by various imperial and ecclesiastic officials to describe the authority of both the bishop of Rome and the bishop of Constantinople during the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries.⁹⁰ There is little denying that John interpreted Gregory’s willingness to order a new trial for two clerics condemned by a Constantinopolitan synod as an attack on his sovereignty. What is unclear is whether or not John objected because he thought he was Rome’s equal in the universal church, or because he held that no bishop from another jurisdiction had the right to intervene in a local matter. Either way, John’s promotion of the ecumenical title in this particular context suggests a calculated move designed to challenge the long-established claim that Rome was the court of last appeal for condemned clerics of any jurisdiction.

A third option, the one Meyendorff advocates, sees “ecumenical patriarch” as a title that blended the patriarch’s ecclesiastical and political privilege throughout the empire.⁹¹ Such an interpretation might explain not only Justinian’s endorsement of the title but also the support it received from subsequent emperors, such as Maurice. Indeed, although Justinian was responsible for the promotion of the *pentarchy*, he consis-

⁸⁸ For an excellent discussion of the relationship between the universality of the ecumenical councils and the role of the emperor to safeguard their conclusions, see John Meyendorff, “What Is an Ecumenical Council?” *Saint Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 17 (1973) 259–73. See also *Novella* 131.1, which endowed the canons of the ecumenical councils with the weight of imperial law.

⁸⁹ We are unable to know for certain why this is the case. It may be insignificant or it may be that he was reluctant to assign the term to these synods because of John’s use of the title. Concerning Gregory’s belief that the councils were theologically authoritative, see Epp. 1.24, 6.65, 7.31, and 9.148. Only in Ep. 6.65 does he refer to them as *universalis*.

⁹⁰ Richards, *Popes and the Papacy* 11.

⁹¹ Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity* 305.

tently undermined patriarchal independence in favor of a unified church that paralleled his vision for a unified empire.⁹² The emperor knew from experience that it was easier to influence a local bishop than a foreign one. Thus, it is possible that his government deliberately promoted the title in the *Codex* and *Novellae* to bolster the authority of the see of Constantinople throughout the empire because such a move could indirectly increase the emperor's influence within the universal church. Such an interpretation would also be consistent with Justinian's view of the distinct but overlapping responsibilities of church and state.⁹³ But even if this interpretation of the title does explain Justinian's support, it does not fully clarify John's use of it in a purely ecclesiological dispute with Rome, nor does it reflect Gregory's ecclesiological objections to it.⁹⁴

A fourth possibility is that "ecumenical patriarch" references no more than the capital city. In other words, to the extent that the *oikouμένη* was governed from the capital of Constantinople, the title "ecumenical patriarch" could simply refer to the patriarch who resides in the queen city. This interpretation might be confirmed if we alter the syntax of the translation into English of the full title in the *Novellae* to read "archbishop and ecumenical patriarch of this capital city" rather than "archbishop of this capital city and ecumenical patriarch."⁹⁵ If this revised translation is appropriate, it would suggest that the title is linked exclusively to the city. But to alter the syntax in this way might also undermine the nuance of a double claim. In other words, if we retain the original syntax, then *ἀρχιεπίσκοπος τῆς βασιλίδας ταύτης πόλεως* (archbishop of this capital city) might represent one aspect of the bishop's jurisdiction, whereas *οἰκουμηνικός πατριάρχης*, which follows the article *καὶ*, represents a second (and broader) realm of authority. Whether that double claim was the intent of the Justinianic legislation or not, John IV clearly thought the title conveyed sufficient prestige when he wrote to Gregory in 595, employing the title as a marker of his authority and sovereignty.

Most likely, the vagueness of the term allowed for multiple applications in the sixth century and beyond, just as it is likely that different parties promoted the title for different reasons (as would have been the case of Justinian and John IV). At the very least, it seems that the majority of patriarchs following John IV interpreted the title as an indicator of their sovereignty within their own patriarchate (i.e., the second option). In certain

⁹² Concerning Justinian and the unity of the church, see *ibid.* 221–50; for Meyendorff's examination of Justinian and the pentarchy, see 249.

⁹³ *Novella* 6. See Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity* 207–11.

⁹⁴ In Ep. 5.37, Gregory did argue that the success of the empire was contingent upon the health of the church, but he linked his concern for the empire's stability to his objection to the title in a decidedly ecclesiological, not political, way.

⁹⁵ *Novella* 3. From the Greek, either translation seems acceptable.

cases, like the present one, that ideology challenged the traditional claim of Rome to serve as a court of appeals for clerics condemned in Constantinople. In later centuries, the occasional dominance of the ecumenical patriarchate over the entire Eastern Church as well as its susceptibility to manipulation from the imperial court suggest that the practical application of the title in the later Byzantine period most often resembled the third option: the title reflected the fact that the ecumenical patriarch was directly linked to the political structures of the empire. Many of the supporters of the title believed that the see of Constantinople had equaled, if not superseded, the see of Rome in importance—Constantinople was, after all, “New Rome.” It would seem that the bishops of Constantinople in the sixth century and beyond were looking to assert greater authority in the church than had been previously accorded to them. To the extent that this attempt compromised traditional Roman privileges and to the extent that this affirmation undermined the dignity of individual bishops, Gregory appears justified in his reaction.

CONCLUSION

The sixth-century controversy over the ecumenical title forced one of the few popes who is equally venerated in both the East and the West to think critically about the ecclesial relationship between Rome and Constantinople on the one hand and the broader church on the other. What scholars and modern apologists alike have misunderstood about the entire episode is that Gregory’s reaction reflected additional concerns with the East and that his policy changed over time. What is more, a careful sifting of Gregory’s diplomatic response to the crisis suggests an ecclesiology that does not fit well into either the modern Orthodox or the modern Roman Catholic model.

Concerning the status of Rome, it is certain that Gregory believed that his see possessed a certain preeminence in the Church, not because of its standing within the empire but because of its association with Peter, the “Prince of the Apostles.” Though he never asserted that Rome was the “head” of the church—the head, he consistently affirmed, was Christ—Gregory did believe that the bishop of Rome had unique privileges compared to the other sees, including the right to serve as a court of last appeal and the ability to invalidate regional synods that broke from the rule of faith.⁹⁶ It is also apparent that, at the times when Gregory felt Roman jurisdiction to be in the greatest danger, he was most willing to assert Petrine authority.

From Gregory’s perspective, John’s promotion of the ecumenical title was especially threatening because the emperor was unwilling to correct

⁹⁶ Gregory consistently reprimanded John for “breaking the canons.”

the patriarch's ambition. Thus, it was in his bid to defend the traditional rights of Rome that Gregory maximized Petrine authority by investing Alexandria and Antioch with the same apostolic capital. This was a calculated move designed to undermine Constantinopolitan arrogance. By affirming the apostolic credentials of Alexandria and Antioch, the pontiff, just as Pope Leo before him, implicated the imperial foundations of Constantinople's authority. It is noteworthy that it was late in the controversy before Gregory employed this argument. The principal strategy of his initial campaign had been that the title undermined the authority of other bishops. Only after that position failed to convince the patriarchs of Antioch and Alexandria did Gregory dig deep into the annals of papal rhetoric to assert further the Petrine privilege and to distinguish apostolic sees from those with lesser credentials.

We should not, however, assume (as others have) that Gregory strictly held to the Roman notion of the three ancient patriarchates. Unlike his papal predecessors, Gregory tacitly approved of the second-place status of Constantinople (as mandated by canon 3 of the Council of Constantinople, canon 28 of the Council of Chalcedon, and *Novella* 131) when he issued his synodal letter at the beginning of his pontificate.⁹⁷ By addressing the same letter to the patriarchs of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, Gregory's encyclical also implied his acceptance of the *pentarchy*, something most other popes resisted. Although Gregory did acknowledge the *pentarchy* elsewhere, it is worth noting that he never made an explicit appeal to it in the controversy with John, nor did he ever solicit the assistance of the Patriarch of Jerusalem in the diplomatic contest.⁹⁸ Instead, as the conflict over the ecumenical title developed, he emphasized Rome's apostolicity and promoted the triad of sees linked to Peter: Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch.

Throughout the dispute, Gregory affirmed that the foundations of the faith were encapsulated, as he often said, "in the four [ecumenical] councils and in the synod held in the time of Justinian."⁹⁹ Gregory, much as his counterparts in the East did, believed in the authority of the synod. Even local councils were more authoritative than individual metropolitans or patriarchs—this is why he was careful to make the point that the vindication of John of Chalcedon had been conducted not by himself but by a

⁹⁷ Gregory, Ep. 1.24. He addresses John of Constantinople first and Eulogius of Alexandria second, followed by Gregory of Antioch and John of Jerusalem.

⁹⁸ Gregory, Ep. 9.148.

⁹⁹ The latter, of course, refers to the fifth ecumenical council, held in Constantinople in 553. Gregory affirmed the authority of the councils in a number of letters, including Epp. 1.24, 4.4, 4.33, 6.65, 7.31, and 9.148; his argument that the title was never affirmed by a council for anyone other than Leo is reflected in Epp. 5.37 and 5.41.

council of Roman bishops.¹⁰⁰ By affirming the rights of individual bishops against universalist claims, Gregory promoted a model of episcopal collegiality that would be refined by subsequent authors, East and West, who objected to the universalist claims of later popes. Though some Catholic interpreters have tried to harmonize Gregory's ideas with later Roman claims of universal jurisdiction, this cannot be demonstrated by the sources—Gregory simply did not support an ecclesiological model in which all episcopal authority was linked to the See of Rome.¹⁰¹

In sum, Gregory's correspondence throughout the controversy denied the universalist claims of any bishop, including the bishop of Rome; but it also promoted a greater sense of Petrine authority than many contemporary Orthodox would be willing to accept. While it is certainly true that subsequent popes extended the authority of Rome beyond anything Gregory endorsed, the movement toward primacy was a long process and, by reinforcing the appeal to Petrine authority, Gregory played a role in that process. What Orthodox writers have generally failed to acknowledge is that the promotion of the ecumenical title by the Eastern Church during the sixth century, whether intentionally or not, led Gregory to rely more fully on the rhetoric of apostolicity and thereby contributed to the subsequent development of papal authority.

¹⁰⁰ Gregory, Epp. 6.15, 6.16, and 6.17. It was very late in the dispute (and perhaps indicative of Gregory's desperation) when the pontiff threatened to personally invalidate the Constantinopolitan council of 599 if it affirmed the title—a threat that included no mention that he would be acting through a synod. See Ep. 9.157.

¹⁰¹ Ullman's suggestion (*Growth of the Papal Government in the Middle Ages* 36–37) that Gregory extended his authority in the West in an attempt to safeguard the true authority of Rome without interference from the imperial government has been sufficiently refuted by scholars. See, for example, Markus, "Gregory the Great's Europe" 30–5, and Richards, *Popes and the Papacy* 26–27.