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Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev: Pope's Title "Patriarch of the West" Removed. What Does It Mean for the Orthodox?

The mass media reported that in the new edition of the "Annuario Pontificio" for 2006 the pope's title "Patriarch of the West" has been dropped. Now the official list of titles includes: "bishop of Rome, vicar of Jesus Christ, successor of the prince of the apostles, supreme pontiff of the Universal Church, Primate of Italy, archbishop and metropolitan of the Roman Province, sovereign of the State of the Vatican City, servant of the servants of God".

Some analysts saw in this omission the desire to improve the relations with the Orthodox Church. The former prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, Cardinal Achille Silvestrini is reported to have said that the deletion was a "sign of ecumenical sensitivity" on the part of Pope Benedict. The cardinal said that in the past some people used the title to provoke negative comparisons between the claims of universal jurisdiction by the worldwide "Patriarchate of the West" and the more restricted size and jurisdiction of the traditional Orthodox patriarchates. According to the cardinal, the pope's gesture "is meant to stimulate the ecumenical journey."

However, it is not at all clear how the removal of the title could possibly ameliorate Catholic-Orthodox relations. It seems that the omission of the title "Patriarch of the West" is meant to confirm the claim to universal church jurisdiction that is reflected in the pope's other titles, and if the Orthodox reaction to the gesture will not be positive, it should not be a surprise.

In the Byzantine epoch there were four Eastern Patriarchates: of Constantinople, of Alexandria, of Antioch, and of Jerusalem. The Patriarchate of Rome was considered as "first among equal" in the diptychs up until 1054, when the ecclesiastical relations between East and West were interrupted. Thus, in the West, there was only one Patriarchate of Rome, while in the East there were four Patriarchates. The Patriarchate of the West together with the four Eastern Patriarchates constituted the so-called "pentarchy".

It is the title "bishop of Rome" that remains then most acceptable for the Orthodox Churches, since it points to the pope's role as diocesan bishop of the city of Rome. The title "archbishop and metropolitan of the Roman Province" shows that the pope's jurisdiction includes not only the city of Rome, but also the province. The title "primate of Italy" indicates that the Bishop of Rome is "first among equals" among the bishops of Italy, i.e., using Orthodox language, primate of a Local Church. With this understanding, neither of the three titles would pose any problem for the Orthodox in case of the re-establishment of the Eucharistic communion between East and West.

In this case the pope of Rome could also be considered as the “Patriarch of the West”, i.e. the spiritual leader of all those Christians who do not belong to the ancient “Eastern Patriarchates” or to those Local Orthodox Churches that appeared in the second millennium.

The model of church unity between East and West will be discussed by the Mixed Catholic-Orthodox Theological Commission that will meet after a six-year break in the fall of 2006. It is clear that this model will be hypothetic, since there remain many obstacles, both of dogmatic and of ecclesiological character, for the restoration of the full communion. However, the main obstacle to unity, according to many Orthodox theologians, is the teaching on the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. It is this teaching that will be discussed in the framework of the Mixed Commission.

In this context unacceptable and even scandalous, from the Orthodox point of view, are precisely those titles that remain in the list, i.e. Vicar of Jesus Christ, Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church.

According to the Orthodox teaching, Christ has no “vicar” who would govern the universal Church in his name.

The title “successor of the prince of the apostles” refers to the Roman Catholic teaching on the primacy of Peter that was passed on to the Bishop of Rome and that submitted to him the universal Church. This teaching has been criticized in Orthodox polemical literature from Byzantine time onwards.

The title “supreme pontiff” (pontifex maximus) originally belonged to the pagan emperors of Rome. It was not rejected by Emperor Constantine when he converted to Christianity. With relation to the pope of Rome the title “supreme pontiff of the Universal Church” points to the pope’s universal jurisdiction which is not and will never be recognized by the Orthodox Churches. It is precisely this title that should have been dropped first, had the move been motivated by the quest for “ecumenical progress” and desire for amelioration of the Catholic-Orthodox relations.

It is to be hoped that the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity will publish an official comment on the removal of the title.