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The Adaptation of the Papacy within the Church

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ABSTRACT:
This short essay briefly details the changes within the Catholic Church’s ecclesiology and its view of the papacy from its inception to the modern day. It focuses on the “witness” and “monarch” models that describe the structures of the church during the first and second millennia, and glances at the changes currently happening within the third millennium.

The Adaptation of the Papacy within the Church

by Kristyn Demers

Throughout the life of the Church, the structure of the hierarchy has developed and changed between two models. The witness model, prevalent during the first millennium of the Church, allowed the different bishops and churches to have equal power. Each church was its own witness and self-representative to the larger, communal Church. As the Church grew and more issues arose, the bishops pushed the power to a central figure, the pope. This led to the emergence of the monarch model.
This model, seen within the second millennium of the Church, focused on having the pope at the center and top of the hierarchy, where all authority flowed through him. This top-down approach provided stability and balance during a time of need. However, it is now seen as outdated and restrictive against the grassroots movements within the church. Analyzing these models and how they have benefited the Church can provide a context for what an efficient new model might be.

Rome is the center of the Catholic Church because of the foundational aspect of the apostolic tradition it maintains and the jurisdictional power it later received during the shift between the witness and monarch models to sustain order within the church. Klaus Schatz comments on the apostolicity of the city stating, “the Roman tradition possessed special authority because it was legitimated by two apostles, Peter and Paul.”

These two apostles organized the church and faced martyrdom in the city. Based on the ability to track this heritage back to two prominent figures of the early Church, the early Roman Christians believed Rome ought to be the central authority and hold power and dominion over the other churches.

The apostolic model of witness was based on tradition and the martyrdom of Peter and Paul. As Rome began to accumulate more power and authority, so did the bishop who resided there. As Hermann Pottmeyer describes, the bishop of Rome was “regarded as witness to, and protector of, the tradition of the Apostles Peter and Paul.” Many popes in the first millennium believed their main duty was to uphold this tradition. Eventually, during the second millennium, the papacy realized preservation of tradition would require more authority and action on behalf of the pope than what was formerly given to him. A shift began where the pope, first seen as a successor of Peter, was then viewed as a representative of Peter, and finally a “sole ‘representation of

3 Pottmeyer, 25.
This transition in power stemmed from the principles adopted by Popes Gregory VII and Innocent IV. The transition explicated the separation between divine law and human laws and instilled an air of legal immunity for the pope as head of the Church. This view of papal inerrancy and the subsequent view of papal infallibility enforced the pope’s ability to preserve the apostolicity of the church by giving him greater dominion over the entire church. Eventually, the pope was seen to possess “a complete freedom of action within the church” which developed into the model of the pope as a monarch figure.

The purpose of the papacy has developed over the years. Within the witness model, the pope was seen as a witness to the tradition of the apostles and his main role was maintaining the apostolic tradition as established by Peter and Paul. In seeking to expand on the preservation of tradition, the monarch model of the papacy defines the role of the pope as the lawmaker and enforcer, as Pottmeyer describes, the “source of all power of jurisdiction in the church.” The modern Church views the papacy differently.

Pope John Paul II viewed the papal role less as a ruler and more as a minister to the church. This inverts the typical hierarchical structure of the church. Instead of ruling over the church, the pope is called to serve the church and all its members. The pope’s role is thus to create unity within the Catholic Church and ecumenically with the Christian community. This allows for a bottom-up approach where grassroots movements create space for the People of God to voice their opinions on important issues they would like to see addressed by the Church. The synodal listening process Pope Francis has utilized in recent years is one example of these changes within the modern church context.

The shifts and transitions of the church models over the years have brought the papacy’s apostolic role into the twenty-first century. Despite

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4 Pottmeyer, 30.
5 Pottmeyer, 31.
6 Pottmeyer, 31.
7 Pottmeyer, 30.
having roots at the advent of the church, the role of the pope has been modernized and reshaped to better fit the workings of society today. The Church demonstrates its ability to balance relevance to today’s society and its apostolic and faith-based identity through its recent reformations of and changes to the way of viewing the role of the papacy. While the Church is still defining what a third-millennium model will look like, the Synod on Synodality provides an exciting preview of a modern view of the papacy.

Bibliography

