

Wednesday reflections on the church

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 11, 2006 All Things Catholic

Speaking of ecclesiology, Benedict has chosen this spring to devote his catechesis during the Wednesday General Audience to reflections on the church. This Wednesday, he spoke about the role of Peter, and by extension the role of the pope.

Benedict pointed to three metaphors employed by Jesus to characterize the special role of Peter within the body of apostles: first, Peter is the "solid foundation" upon which the church is to be built; second, Peter will have the keys of the kingdom of Heaven; third, Peter has the power to bind or loosen, "in the sense that he will be able to establish or prohibit that which he retains necessary for the life of the church, which is Christ's and remains Christ's."

"It is always Christ's church, and not Peter's," Benedict emphasized.

Nonetheless, Benedict said that with these three metaphors, scripture presents with "great clarity" an understanding of the papacy "which later reflection will refer to as 'primary of jurisdiction.' "

Ecclesiologically speaking, "jurisdiction" is the magic word in this formula.

What it means is that the papacy is not merely a *primus inter pares*, a kind of honorary primacy within the College of Bishops. The pope is not the Patriarch of Constantinople. The papacy is, to use the language of the street, a "primacy with teeth," which possesses what the Code of Canon Law terms "supreme, full, immediate and universal ordinary power in the church."

As various Catholic theologians have put the point, traditional Catholic ecclesiology sees the pope as not merely *primus inter pares*, but *primus super pares et partes*, that is, "the first above equals and all parties."

Benedict goes on to say that this primacy is entrusted to Peter so that he may guide Christians to "universal communion" and to "charity in everyday life," rather than enjoying any sort of pomp and circumstance.

Yet Benedict's words on Wednesday indicate he remains fully committed to a robust, jurisdictional view of the papal role.

As is well known, the nature and extent of papal power remains the single most divisive issue in ecumenical dialogue, perhaps especially with the Orthodox, since Catholics and Orthodox otherwise share largely the same ministries, sacraments, and faith. As Fr. Adriano Garuti has shown in his 2000 book *Primacy of the Bishop of Rome and the Ecumenical Dialogue*, despite reams of documentation from official ecumenical exchanges, there's little indication of fundamental shifts on either side; the Orthodox still hold a conciliar or synodal ecclesiology, in which there's really no room for a primacy of jurisdiction, while Catholics have a more "pontifical" ecclesiology in which the pope enjoys direct powers of governance.

In his 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, John Paul II invited other Christian denominations into a "patient and fraternal dialogue" about new ways in which the Petrine office might be exercised, yet "without renouncing anything essential to its mission."

What Benedict's Wednesday reflection helps clarify is that, from his point of view, while the *mode* of exercising papal primacy can be discussed, the *nature* of that primacy is founded upon Christ's design for the church and cannot be altered. In the short run, at least, that probably makes ecumenical détente with the Orthodox even less likely.

Perhaps recognizing the point, Benedict closed his Wednesday reflection with a prayer that papal primacy "will be ever more recognized in its true meaning by the brothers still not in full communion with us."

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