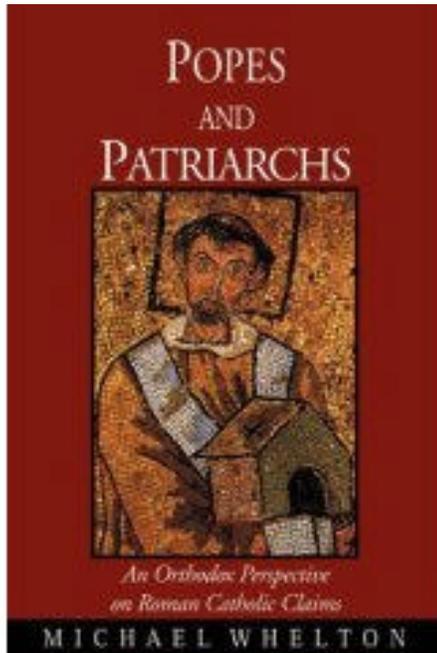


Michael Whelton, *Popes and Patriarchs: An Orthodox Perspective on Roman Catholic Claims*, Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 2006, 177+pp.  
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**By Adam A.J. DeVille**

For nearly forty years, the papacy has been the most fundamental issue in Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. The papacy as an ecumenical issue was given very bold, and renewed focus in 1995 when Pope John Paul II issued his landmark encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, asking for “Church leaders and their theologians to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject.”

This new book from British Columbia resident Michael Whelton is, however unintentionally, a contribution to that dialogue, although of a very different sort. He clearly did not intend it as such, strangely, Pope John Paul II is nowhere cited in the text, and *Ut Unum Sint* is likewise never mentioned. However, he makes a contribution insofar as he at least poses some important questions in his attempt at “discovering the way Rome was viewed by the early Church, and her position relative to that of the other patriarchates in the Ecumenical Councils” (7). Whelton also asks whether “the West might have successfully preserved the collegial tradition, and thus her unity with the Eastern half of the Church, if Rome had been only one of several patriarchal sees in the West. The additional sees might have acted as a brake on the development of a papal monarchy, with its enormous centralized power” (8).

If Whelton had actually investigated these questions, he may well have written a profitable and helpful book. Alas, immediately after posing these questions, he drops them to move into the first of three irrelevant chapters (of autobiography). Of the ten chapters in this book, no fewer than five, fully half the book, have nothing whatsoever to say about the papal and patriarchal offices: the book's title is thus misleading. The book purports to treat the papacy *and patriarchates*, but patriarchates are never discussed except cursorily and always *passim*. The author offers no discussion at all about the origins or functioning of the patriarchal office or of the substantial differences between patriarchs (as Nicholas Lossky has argued, the Patriarch of Moscow has had quasi-papal powers while most others do not) or within patriarchates in different historical periods.

The title is not only misleading thing about this book. Whelton also seems to be less than completely forthright in acknowledging his sources. There are far too many instances of him citing texts from various Fathers or councils (eg., pp. 69, 71, 85, 89 90, 103, 137), and then footnoting their sources as Migne or Mansi, which is of course standard academic procedure. These citations; however, have been translated into English, and Whelton never acknowledges whose translations he is using.

Whelton thus tries to pass himself off as a serious researcher who has investigated the original sources, and judiciously weighed all the evidence. On p. 7 he claims to have based his book "at all times" on "the best of contemporary scholarship," but that is a demonstrably false claim, not least in Whelton's treatment of the papacy in the thought of Maximus the Confessor. Whelton is clearly ignorant of recent and serious Orthodox scholarship, including that of Andrew Louth ("The Ecclesiology of Saint Maximos the Confessor," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 4 [2004]: 109-20) and Jean-Claude Larchet ("The Question of the Roman Primacy in the Thought of Saint Maximus the Confessor" in ed. Walter Kasper, *The Petrine Ministry: Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue* [Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 2005], 188-209).

Whelton's self-presentation as a scholar further falls down in the face of an absurd number of solecisms and errors of grammar and spelling (e.g.,

pp. 19, 22, 23, 30, 47, 74, 80, 93, 99, 149). In addition, one glance at the footnotes and the bibliography shows that this book is not even remotely comprehensive. Leave aside the fact that there is too much reliance on the works of unbalanced polemicists (e.g., the lapsed Jesuit Malachi Martin) or outright cranks (e.g., Edward Denny), all of whom are treated as though they deserve an equal hearing and serious respect. What is truly intolerable is that no attention whatsoever is given to such reputable and influential Orthodox scholars who have published numerous, serious books and articles in this area, including, inter alia, Olivier Clément, Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, Archbishop Vsevelod of Scopelos, Vigen Guroian, John Erickson, Nicholas Lossky, Alexander Schmemmann, Nicholas Afanassieff, Stylianos Harkianakis, Paul Evdokimov, Emmanuel Clapsis, Archbishop Mesrob (Krikorian), Thomas Hopko, Nicolae Durr, Vlassios Phidas, and Bishop Hilarion (Alfeyev). Does it not seem strange that a book purporting to offer “an Orthodox perspective” on the papacy (and patriarchates) would be almost entirely bereft of actual Orthodox thought from the above-named scholars and hierarchs? Does it not seem stranger still that John Meyendorff, whom Whelton does cite several times in his bibliography, edited a book, *The Primacy of Peter: Essays in Ecclesiology and the Early Church*, which Whelton does not list and seems not to have read?

If Whelton is guilty of ignoring relevant Orthodox literature on the topic, his treatment of Roman Catholic scholarship (as well as official statements) is even worse, moving from ignorance to misunderstanding to outright distortion. His treatment bizarrely begins with a recondite letter of Pope Leo XIII, *Satis Cognitum*, issued in 1896. Why Whelton chose to deal with this letter rather than other more relevant and recent ones (of which *Ut Unum Sint* is doubtless the most salient) quickly becomes obvious: it conveniently functions as a straw-man for Whelton to attack. Leo’s letter, which was far from being a centrepiece of his pontificate or of Catholic thought since then, is of course very much a product of not only Tridentine soteriological exclusivism, but also (as Owen Chadwick, George Weigel and other scholars have understood) the straitened politics of the nineteenth century: its “high” papal claims must be interpreted in that context, and they cannot and must not be interpreted in isolation from the dramatic

changes in the papacy in the following two centuries. Whelton's treatment, however, is grossly anachronistic.

Whelton's treatment of the papacy, in fact, is subject to so many, and such serious misunderstandings that it is hard to believe his claim that he and his family were for many years "loyal Roman Catholics with a transcendental vision of our church" (35). On p. 7, Whelton immediately puts a foot wrong with his absurd assertion that the "claim of the papacy to supreme universal jurisdiction...is the *raison d'être* [sic] of the Roman Catholic Church." This is not a claim even the most ardent ultramontanist has made or would make. Such a crude formulation as this makes it sound as though the papacy and the Church exist only as instruments of some diabolical "will to power."

If Whelton had done some research, he would have discovered the authoritative decree on ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, which describes the nature and purpose of the Church at length. More recently still, Whelton could have consulted the 1992 universal *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (a runaway bestseller available in print and freely on the Internet in at least six languages), which again uses a variety of expressions to describe the purpose of the Church, all of which underscore the point that "the Church, in Christ, is like a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men" (no. 775, quoting *Lumen Gentium* no. 1). The Church's reason for being, then, is sacramental, and her structure "is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ's members, and holiness is measured according to the 'great mystery' in which the Bride responds with the gift of love to the gift of the Bridegroom" (no. 773).

Whelton persists in making fatuous statements about the papacy when he says that the pope tries "to rule the global church like a giant single diocese" (117). This is a charge that was first bandied about by that theological giant Otto von Bismarck, the imperial Prussian chancellor, in the wake of the First Vatican Council. It was rebutted by the German bishops in a letter that Pope Pius IX himself highly praised.

This charge was not only rebutted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: it was also dealt with in the 20<sup>th</sup> in Roman Catholic canon law, which Whelton, not surprisingly, ignores (see canons 330-341 of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*). Finally, one must consider that, according to this “logic,” if the pope did indeed run the global church as a single diocese, such a *modus operandi* would obviate the need for other bishops. Why, then, are there roughly 3000 Catholic bishops holding jurisdiction over an equally large number of dioceses scattered throughout the world?

This book, in sum, can be counted upon to provide neither reliable Catholic perspectives nor reliable Orthodox ones. In no way can it be considered scholarly or even accurate. Its only salutary purpose is to demonstrate anew that many divisions between Orthodox and Catholics are not so much substantial as simply the result of what Jesuit casuists of the old school used to call “invincible ignorance.”

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