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THE CHURCH AND THE POPE: THE CASE FOR ORTHODOXY

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Icon of Saint Peter, St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai

St. Peter the Apostle

The Church and the Pope: The Case for Orthodoxy

by Robert B. Spencer



Uncut Mountain Press

THE CHURCH AND THE POPE

The Case for Orthodoxy

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Front Cover Artwork: Detail, from the Monastery of St. Catherine's Monastery on Sinai, Egypt.
5th - 6th century.

Scriptural quotations are primarily taken from the King James Version.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Robert B. Spencer, 1962 -

The Church and the Pope: The Case for Orthodoxy.—1st ed.

ISBN: 978-1-63941-005-7

I. Christian History - Eastern Orthodox
II. Christian Theology - Eastern Orthodox

Whoever calls himself universal bishop, or desires this title, is, by his pride, the precursor to the Antichrist. — St. Gregory the Dialogist, Pope of Rome

The Church is settled on the bishops, and every act of the Church is regulated by these same prelates. — St. Cyprian of Carthage

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

I pray God blesses this work to be spiritually beneficial
in the journeys of Christians and non-Christians alike
who earnestly desire to know the Truth.

May He grant you courage, wisdom, and peace.

Both now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

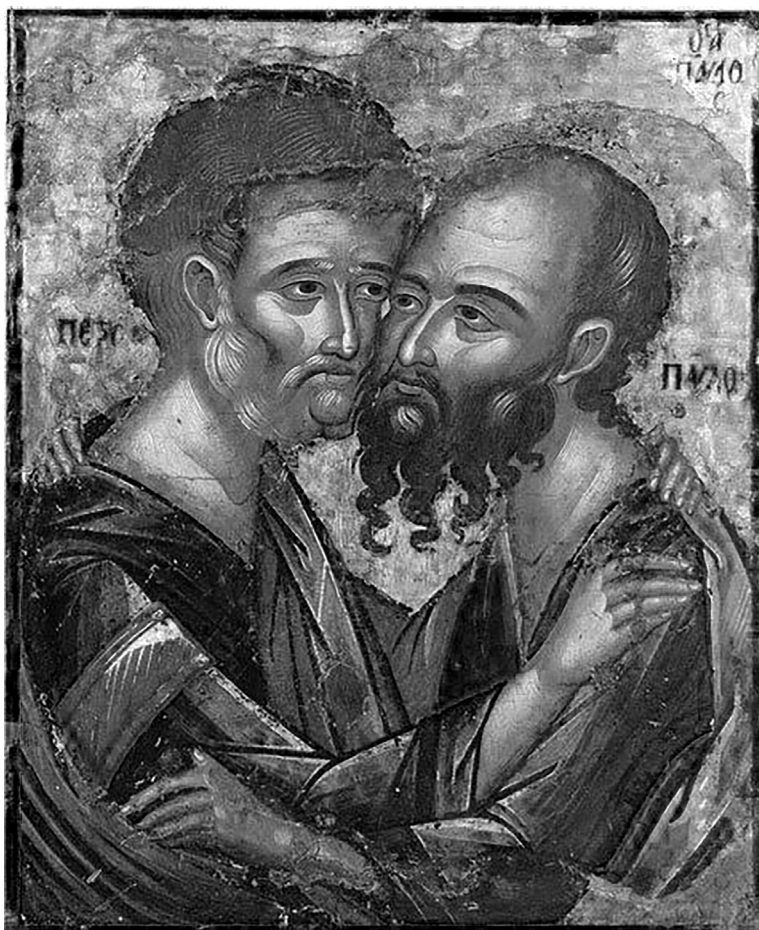


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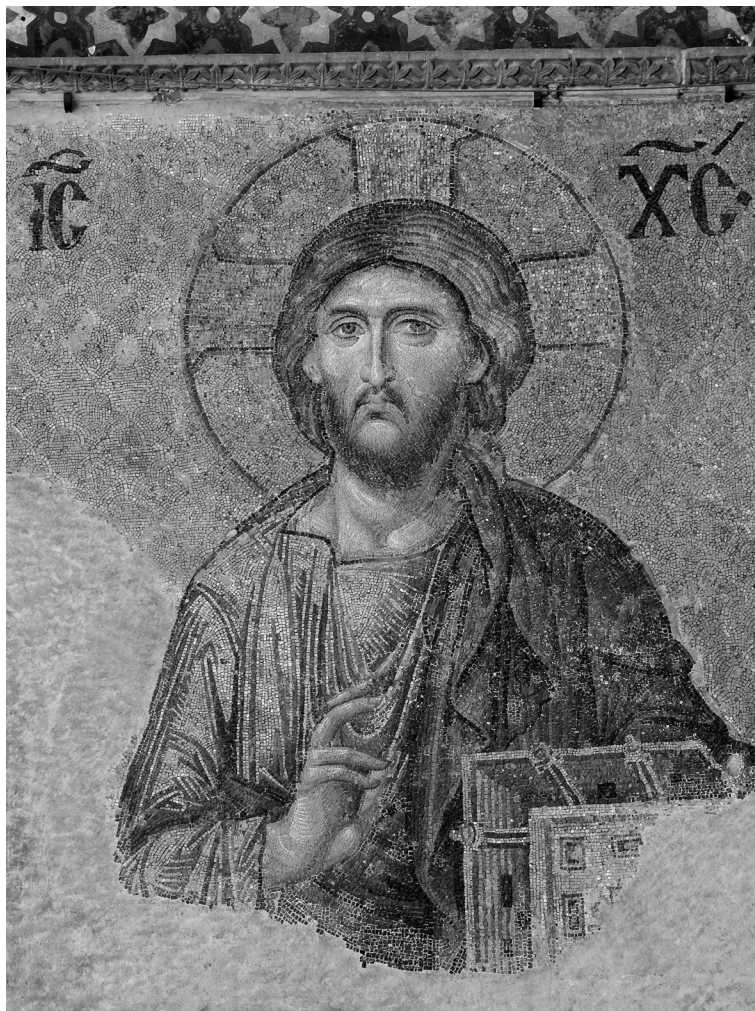
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Christ Pantocrator



PREFACE: A PERSONAL NOTE

In 2015, after nearly thirty years as a Catholic, I left Catholicism and shortly thereafter rejoined the Orthodox Church, the Church into which I had been baptized many years before.

My return to Orthodoxy was the result of a series of circumstances that led me to undertake a reexamination of long-held and largely unexamined premises. That reexamination ultimately led me to a rediscovery of the Orthodox Church, which in one way I never fully left. As a Melkite Greek Catholic, I had been able to participate in the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great, and other elements of the majestic and profound Byzantine liturgical tradition.

Rediscovering and rejoining the Orthodox Church has been a great blessing to me, blessings that have aided me through difficult times.

However, this change bewildered some of my family and friends. I have been warned about hellfire. I have received numerous emails explaining to me why the true church founded by our Lord Jesus Christ was only to be found in the communion of the Bishop of Rome.

In light of this concern, I thought it might be helpful (to those who are close to me, and to others who have considered the vexed questions dividing Orthodox and Catholics) for me to explain what I discovered that made me leave Catholicism, why I rejoined the Orthodox Church, and what difference it makes.

I write this not out of malice toward Roman Catholics. My fondest hope, in fact, is that this will be the beginning of a mutually fruitful discussion to the spiritual benefit of all. As the largest Christian body in the world, with a long and often quite unhappy history of interaction with the Orthodox Church, Roman Catholicism's differences with Orthodoxy should not lead us to lose sight of the

fact that we are all striving to love and serve Jesus Christ and bring His light to the world. But out of respect for God, Who is Truth itself, those differences must not be ignored or papered over either.

Among the differences between Orthodoxy and the primary Catholic doctrines that led to schism from Orthodoxy, are those regarding papal authority and its stances on the nature of authority in the Church in general. It is those considerations that I will outline here, as a response to the case Catholic apologists make for the papacy; a case that many of them direct toward Orthodox Christians in an attempt to convert them to Catholicism. I hope to show at the same time that the Orthodox understanding of the authority and infallibility of the Church is preferable to the Catholic one on the grounds of both Scripture and Holy Tradition, as well as reason. I'll also explore some of the controverted issues, particularly but not solely the Filioque, that divide the Churches. I'll also explain why the Orthodox position is consonant with Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Holy Fathers and, quite simply, makes sense.

My intention in doing all this is to illuminate the truth, and offer some pertinent information to both Orthodox and Catholic Christians. I have been told, however, that this is a pointless exercise since most people don't evaluate religious claims rationally. If you're Italian or Irish, you're Roman Catholic. If you're Greek, you're Greek Orthodox, and so on. Religious affiliation is, they say, more akin to racial, tribal, and national identity than to a choice based on a rational consideration of the available evidence.

For many, indeed most people, that is true. And others will consider an inquiry such as this one to be out of step with the times. This is the time for dialogue stressing our similarities, not discussions of what separates us, and even less of who is right in those intramural disagreements. I freely confess to being out of step with the times, and not in sync with what many in both churches consider to be important emphases and approaches to various controverted issues today. I offer this inquiry respectfully based on the proposition that no amount of emphasis on what we have in common will erase our differences. If we wish ultimately to resolve those disagreements, we must bring them out in the open and present our cases.

The Scriptures themselves contain calls to evaluate and defend the faith on rational terms. St. Peter tells believers "... be ready always to give an answer

to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you ..." (I Peter 3:15) And when Paul came to Thessalonica, "... where was a synagogue of the Jews: And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ." (Acts 17:1-3) He was not generally well received there, so he went on to Berea, "... who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." (Acts 17:10-11)

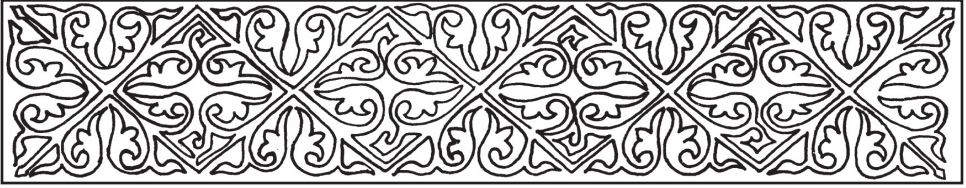
Some will disparage this entire endeavor, saying that such matters as are considered in this book are best left to theologians, and I am not one. That is true. I don't claim to replace or supersede or outdo the various Catholic-Orthodox theological commissions that are holding discussions today. This book is intended simply to raise questions based on certain available evidence in the hope of leading some people to the truth.

Others will say that since I have been on both sides of this issue, I cannot be trusted as an analyst. To that, I would respond that it is precisely 'because' I have been on both sides of this issue, and can see clearly each side's arguments, that this book has any of the merit it may possess. In any case, the evidence I present here stands on its own, regardless of who has produced it. I hope that it will be evaluated on its own merits.

In writing this book, I have tried at all times to 'speak the truth in love' and help all members of the Holy Orthodox Church, including myself, to "grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ." (Ephesians 4:15)



The Chiefs of the Apostles jointly establishing the Church



CHAPTER ONE

The Role of Saint Peter in the New Testament

THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITY

Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants disagree with one another on, among other things, the question of who has authority in the church, and of what that authority consists.

Protestants, the youngest of the three groups, generally hold to the idea known as *sola scriptura*: Scripture alone is and ought to be the only authority in the Church.

Catholics and Orthodox have never held to the *sola scriptura* doctrine for several reasons. Among them is the fact that the New Testament Church, as depicted in the Acts of the Apostles, existed without the portions of New Testament Scripture that had not as yet been written; the Church predates the Scriptures, and the Scriptures are a product of the Church, not the other way around. Protestants would never have known even which books made up their Scripture were it not for the apostolic Church.

What's more, Scripture doesn't interpret itself. Both Orthodox and Catholics, unlike Protestants, recognize that the bishops of the Church, as successors of the apostles, have a certain teaching authority within the Church, to settle disputed questions and determine what is the faith and what is not. Both believe that in this, the Holy Spirit guides the Church, as per the words of Christ, "... I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth ..." (John 16:12-13)

Both Orthodox and Catholics also believe that the Church, because of this guidance of the Holy Spirit, is infallible when it makes definitive decisions on the contents of the faith. They agree that ecumenical councils, gatherings of all the world's bishops (or, in practice, as many as practicable), possess this infallibility. Then Catholicism goes farther, insisting that the Pope, as Bishop of Rome and successor of St. Peter, is the first bishop, the earthly head of the Church, and on his own possesses that infallibility when defining dogmas concerning faith and morals.

That is one of the key differences between Orthodox and Catholics, and so is the first topic we will consider. Did the Lord Jesus give St. Peter special authority in the Church? Does this authority pass on to the bishops of Rome? And, lastly, is the Pope infallible when he defines doctrine?

THE ROLE OF PETER

The primary New Testament passages that Catholics use to support the claim that Peter had a unique role among the apostles are Matthew 16:18-20, Luke 22:32, and John 21:15-17.

In the passage from Matthew, the Lord Jesus says to Peter, “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter [Greek *Petros*, a masculine form of the word *petra*, rock], and upon this rock [*petra*] I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Later in the same Gospel, the Lord says much the same thing to the apostles, “Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.” (Matthew 18:18) So the controversy centers on the significance of Jesus' giving Peter the name “Rock,” and likewise giving him the “keys.” Was the Lord conferring a particular authority on Peter that was to be passed on to his successors and form the foundation for the papal monarchy? Or were these singular honors conferred upon Peter alone? Or is there some other explanation altogether?

The Catholic interpretation of the passage is that Jesus meant to give Peter a particular authority among the apostles and primacy over the whole Church,