

Did the First Millennium Know the Papacy?

The Record of the Undivided Church, Case by Case

by Richard Whiting

© 2026 Richard Whiting. All rights reserved. May be reproduced in whole, with attribution. See full notice at the end of this document.

Contents

I. The Question the Schism Comes Down To

II. The Orthodox Reading at Full Strength

III. Clement: Rome Commands Before the New Testament Is Closed

IV. Victor and Stephen: The Rulings That Stuck

V. The Appeals Ran One Way

VI. Chalcedon, Read Whole

VII. The Formula the East Signed

VIII. Nicholas, Photius, and the Charge of Novelty

IX. What Best Explains the Whole Record

Endnotes

For Further Reading

I. The Question the Schism Comes Down To

The dispute between Rome and the Orthodox East comes down, at bottom, to a single historical question: what did the undivided Church of the first thousand years actually believe about the bishop of Rome? Both sides claim that millennium. The Orthodox hold that Rome ranked first in honor among the patriarchs—a presidency of love, a seniority among brothers—and that the claim to universal jurisdiction defined at Vatican I would have been unrecognizable to the Fathers. Catholics hold that the seed of everything Vatican I defined is visible from the Church’s first generations: not the developed vocabulary, but the thing itself—a see that acts, teaches, receives appeals, and is treated, even by those quarreling with it, as somehow different in kind.

The modern Catholic–Orthodox dialogue has drawn the line with admirable precision. The Ravenna document of 2007, agreed by the official Joint Commission of both communions, records that both sides accept that Rome occupied the first place in the *taxis*—the canonical order of the great sees—and that the bishop of Rome was the *protos*, the first, among the patriarchs. What the two sides dispute, in the document’s own words, is “the interpretation of the historical evidence from this era regarding the prerogatives of the bishop of Rome as *protos*.”¹ That is exactly the question this essay takes up. Not whether Rome was first—no one in the dialogue denies it—but what the first place carried: honor within a conciliar family, or a real Petrine authority.

A word about method. The question is historical, so the argument must be cumulative: no single episode proves either reading, and this essay will not pretend one does. What can be done is to set out the record case by case, give the Orthodox reading of each case at full strength, and then ask which account best explains the record taken whole. That calibrated question—not “which side can proof-text the Fathers”—is the one an honest inquirer needs answered.

II. The Orthodox Reading at Full Strength

The Orthodox reading of the first millennium is not a denial that Rome mattered. It is a precise account of *how* Rome mattered: first in honor, not first in jurisdiction—the eldest brother in a family of patriarchates, not the father of the family.

The case runs like this. The Church of the councils governed herself synodally. Nicaea settled the faith by the assembled episcopate, not by Roman decree; canon 6 of Nicaea treats Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch as parallel regional authorities, each supreme in its own sphere.² The developing order of the five patriarchal sees gave Rome the presidency—the Chieti document of 2016, again agreed by both communions, states that the order was “based on and sanctioned by the ecumenical councils, with the see of Rome occupying the first place”³—but a president of a synod is not a monarch over it. The very phrase the tradition kept from Ignatius of Antioch, the church “presiding in love,” names a moral headship, not a legal one.

And the Catholic proof-cases, the Orthodox argue, read smaller up close. Victor’s threat to excommunicate the churches of Asia drew a rebuke from Irenaeus, and the Asian churches did not yield. Stephen’s ruling on rebaptism was defied outright by Cyprian and the African councils. Julius received Athanasius as the natural arbiter of a dispute the East had botched—and his own letter appeals to *custom*, not to divine right. The canons of Sardica were the act of a local Western council, granting a privilege; what a council grants, a council defines and can limit. Chalcedon examined Leo’s Tome before acclaiming it, and enacted canon 28 grounding the privileges of Rome and Constantinople

alike in the imperial rank of their cities. The formula of Hormisdas was signed under an emperor determined to end a schism, and signatures under pressure prove little. When Nicholas I pressed the full Roman claim against Photius in the ninth century, the East did not recognize an ancient right being enforced; it recognized a new thing being asserted—and said so.

That is a serious case, seriously argued, and the sections that follow will not caricature it. The Catholic reply is not that any link in it is invented. It is that each link, examined closely, carries a detail the honor-primacy reading has to explain away—and that the details all lean the same direction.

III. Clement: Rome Commands Before the New Testament Is Closed

Begin at the beginning. Around the year 96, while the apostle John was likely still alive in Ephesus, the church of Corinth deposed its presbyters, and the church that intervened was Rome—not Ephesus, though Ephesus was closer and could claim a living apostle. The letter known as 1 Clement does not offer Corinth advice. It commands: the deposed presbyters are to be restored, the instigators are to submit, and those who disobey “the words spoken by him through us” will “involve themselves in transgression and no small danger.”⁴

Two details matter more than the letter’s tone. First, nobody asked Rome to explain itself: no reply survives protesting that Corinth’s affairs were Corinth’s business, and the principle that one church does not command another is exactly what a synodal ecclesiology would have required Corinth to assert. Second, Corinth kept the letter and read it in the liturgy for generations—Dionysius, bishop of Corinth around 170, tells Rome that “today we observed the holy day of the Lord, and read your letter,” meaning Clement’s.⁵ A church does not enshrine, in its public worship, the document of its own humiliation—unless it understood the intervention as something other than an intrusion.

IV. Victor and Stephen: The Rulings That Stuck

A century later, Victor of Rome judged a question of universal practice—the date of Easter—and reached for a weapon no local bishop could coherently claim: the excommunication of whole provinces on the other side of the sea. Eusebius preserves the sequel: Irenaeus of Lyons, with many others, begged Victor not to cut off the churches of Asia.⁶ The Orthodox remember the episode as an overreach rebuked, and the rebuke is real. But notice what Irenaeus does not say. He does not say Victor lacks the authority; he pleads with him not to use it. One does not beg a man to sheathe a sword he does not

have. The remonstrance concedes the power while disputing the prudence—and that distinction, visible before the year 200, is the whole Catholic claim in embryo.

The rebaptism controversy of the 250s runs the same shape at greater depth. Stephen of Rome ruled that converts baptized by heretics were not to be rebaptized; Cyprian of Carthage and the African councils defied him, and Cyprian answered Rome with the principle the East never surrendered: each bishop answers to God alone for his own church.⁷ If the story ended there, it would strongly support the Orthodox reading. It does not end there. The Church—East and West alike—settled on Stephen’s ruling, not Cyprian’s protest; Augustine could later remind the Donatists that the universal practice of the Church stood where Stephen had stood. A see whose disputed rulings on doctrine and discipline become the whole Church’s settled practice is exercising something more than seniority. And no comparable record runs the other direction: there is no case of Alexandria commanding Rome, or Antioch judging Gaul, for the honor-primacy reading to set beside these.

V. The Appeals Ran One Way

When the East’s own machinery failed, its bishops did not convene a rival synod and rest; they went to Rome. Athanasius, deposed by Eastern councils, was received and vindicated by Julius of Rome, whose letter to the Eastern bishops scolds them for ignoring “the custom ... for word to be written first to us, and then for a just decision to be passed from this place.”⁸ The Orthodox reading takes “custom” as something less than divine right, and the scope of “to us” is genuinely debated. But weigh what the sentence presupposes: a custom of first referral and final decision, already old enough in 341 to scold with. Customs old enough to scold with are not courtesies.

Two years later the council of Sardica wrote the road into canon law: a deposed bishop might appeal to Rome, and Rome might order a retrial.⁹ Grant the Orthodox point that Sardica was a Western council whose canons bound where they were received. The telling fact is that the East used the road. John Chrysostom, the East’s greatest bishop, deposed at the Synod of the Oak in 403, appealed to Innocent of Rome, who annulled the proceedings and broke communion with Chrysostom’s enemies.¹⁰ Basil of Caesarea, a generation earlier, begged Rome’s intervention in the schism at Antioch—irritably, unsuccessfully, but persistently, which makes the point better: one does not keep petitioning a court of honor.¹¹ Appeals do not create authority; they presuppose it. Courts of honor do not reverse verdicts.

VI. Chalcedon, Read Whole

Chalcedon is where both readings stake their flag, so read it whole. Yes—the fathers of 451 tested Leo’s Tome against Cyril before acclaiming it. A council is not a dictation session, and Catholic teaching never said otherwise. But read what they did around the testing. The council met because Leo, alone among the patriarchs, had rejected the “Robber Council” of 449; it was chaired by Roman legates at Rome’s insistence; it deposed Dioscorus of Alexandria in the legates’ formula—for daring, among other crimes, to excommunicate the pope. When the Tome was read, the fathers cried “Peter has spoken through Leo.”¹² And when the council finished, it wrote to Leo asking him to *confirm* its acts, because, as the fathers put it, he had presided over them “as head over members.”¹³

Then comes canon 28, which granted Constantinople privileges second only to Rome’s and grounded both sees’ standing in the imperial rank of their cities—the plainest first-millennium statement of what much of the East believed primacy rested on. Leo refused it. And here the record speaks: canon 28—alone of Chalcedon’s work—stood outside the Church’s common law for centuries precisely because Rome had not ratified it.¹⁴ The pattern is not honor cheered and jurisdiction checked; it is a council that argued, examined, and then sought from one see the thing it sought from no other: ratification. A council able to define the faith of the whole Church, asking one bishop to make its work stand, is not describing a first-among-equals.

VII. The Formula the East Signed

The Acacian schism divided Rome from Constantinople for thirty-five years. It ended in 519 when the patriarch of Constantinople and the Eastern episcopate subscribed a text written in Rome—the formula of Hormisdas—confessing that “in the Apostolic See the Catholic religion has always been kept unsullied,” and binding themselves to communion with that see as the test of orthodoxy.¹⁵

The Orthodox reply is that documents signed under imperial pressure register diplomacy as much as doctrine, and the pressure was real: Justin wanted the schism closed. But union documents are usually signed under pressure—including the subscriptions at Nicaea itself, with the emperor in the room—and nobody argues Nicaea’s signatures prove little. What the pressure argument cannot explain is why *this* was the formula that could end an Eastern schism at all. The text presupposes, on both sides, that communion with Rome is where the question of orthodoxy gets settled; that is why signing it ended the dispute. One does not end a schism by signing a compliment.

VIII. Nicholas, Photius, and the Charge of Novelty

The ninth century supplies the Orthodox case its strongest chapter. When Nicholas I intervened in the disputed succession at Constantinople—Ignatius deposed, Photius installed—he asserted the Roman claim in its full form, and much of the East heard a new thing being asserted rather than an old right being enforced. The councils of 867 and 879–880, and the polemics on both sides, hardened positions that the eleventh century would formalize.¹⁶

Two observations keep the chapter in proportion. First, novelty of *tone* is not novelty of *claim*: everything Nicholas asserted—the right to receive appeals, to judge patriarchs, to ratify or refuse councils—has appearances in the record already walked, from Julius to Chalcedon to Hormisdas. What was new was the collision, not the claim. Second, the East’s own ninth-century actions concede more than its polemics: both Ignatius and Photius, rivals for the same throne, appealed their causes to Rome—each seeking from the pope the judgment that would make his title good. Even the century that generated the schism’s vocabulary behaved, at the decisive moments, as though Rome’s judgment were the one worth having.

IX. What Best Explains the Whole Record

The honest summary runs like this. The first millennium nowhere states Vatican I’s vocabulary—granted, and the Catholic doctrine of development expects exactly that, as it expects Nicaea’s vocabulary to be absent from the second century. What the record shows, repeatedly and from the earliest documents, is a see that teaches and is not corrected, judges and is not judged, receives the East’s appeals in its crises, anchors every reunion, and supplies the one signature councils ask for.

Set the two explanations side by side and weigh them calibrated claim by calibrated claim. An honorary presidency explains some episodes; it is consistent with a few; it strains against the appeals, breaks on Hormisdas, and cannot say why the “first among equals” was never once treated as merely equal when the faith was at stake. The Catholic reading—a real primacy, present early, developing under pressure as every doctrine developed—has the fewer anomalies to explain. That is not a claim of proof; history rarely proves. It is a claim about which account best explains the evidence, and it is the same kind of claim Newman made about development generally: that the early centuries and the later definitions belong to one story, the acorn and the oak.¹⁷

The first millennium did not speak Vatican I’s vocabulary. It behaved, again and again, as though it believed the thing the vocabulary would one day define. The reader who doubts it is invited to do what this essay has done: take the Orthodox reading of each case at full strength, hold it against the details—the letter Corinth kept, the sword Irenaeus begged

Victor to sheathe, the rulings that stuck, the appeals that ran one way, the ratification Chalcedon sought from one side only, the formula that ended a schism—and ask which account has less to explain away.

Endnotes

1. Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, Ravenna document (2007), §41. The document records the shared affirmation that Rome was first in the *taxis* and its bishop *protos* among the patriarchs, and the disagreement “on the interpretation of the historical evidence from this era regarding the prerogatives of the bishop of Rome as *protos*.”
2. Nicaea I (325), canon 6. Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Romans*, prologue, for the church “presiding in love.”
3. Chieti document (2016), §15.
4. *1 Clement* 57–59; the quoted warning is from ch. 59.
5. Dionysius of Corinth, in Eusebius, *Church History* 4.23.
6. Eusebius, *Church History* 5.23–24.
7. Cyprian, Letters 71–75, with the Seventh Council of Carthage (256); for the later settlement, Augustine, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, Books II–III.
8. Julius, in Athanasius, *Apologia Contra Arianos* 35 (NPNF translation). The scope of “to us” is debated; the Orthodox reading is given in Section II.
9. Sardica (343), canons 3–5.
10. Chrysostom’s letters to Innocent I, with Palladius, *Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom*.
11. Basil, Letters 66, 69, 70.
12. Acts of Chalcedon, session 2 (the acclamation follows the reading of the Tome).
13. The council’s letter to Leo, transmitted with the acts; Leo’s replies address canon 28.
14. Chalcedon (451), canon 28, with Leo, Letters 104–106, refusing it.
15. The formula of Hormisdas (519), in the translation printed in Denzinger; subscribed by Patriarch John of Constantinople and subsequently by the Eastern bishops.
16. The correspondence of Nicholas I on the Photian affair, with the councils of 867 and 879–880.

17. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), esp. ch. 4 on the papacy as a development anticipated by the early record.

For Further Reading

The Letter of Clement to the Corinthians, c. A.D. 96—Rome commanding another church's obedience. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1010.htm>.

Church History, by Eusebius—Book 5, chs. 23–24 for Victor and the Easter controversy. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2501.htm>.

Apologia Contra Arianos, by St. Athanasius—ch. 35 for Julius's letter on Rome's custom. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2808.htm>.

The Council of Chalcedon (451), the definition and canons, canon 28 included. Free online at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum04.htm>.

The Ravenna Document, Catholic–Orthodox Joint Commission (2007)—what both sides now say about the first millennium. Free online at <https://www.christianunity.va>.

The Early Papacy—To the Synod of Chalcedon in 451, by Adrian Fortescue—the classic short case from the first-millennium record.

An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, by St. John Henry Newman—why the developed papacy and the early record belong to one story. Free online at <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/development/>.

*

“He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ ... Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.’”

—John 21:17

*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam
To the greater glory of God*

Copyright and Distribution

This essay is © 2026 Richard Whiting. All rights reserved. It may be reproduced and distributed freely, in whole and with attribution, for any noncommercial purpose. It may not be sold, altered, or excerpted in ways that misrepresent its argument. Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, and 1971 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic reading of the first-millennium papacy*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.