

THE UNIVERSAL PATRIARCH

*The Story of How one Saint of the Church
Became Offended with Another Saint of the Church*

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Saint John the Faster (celebrated by the Church on September 15/2) was most likely the inventor of the alarm clock. This sixth century Patriarch of Constantinople was a most meek and gentle soul, a man of prayer and fasting, a true monk. He was also a wonderworker who, among other things, gave sight to a man who had been born blind.

As we mentioned above, he probably also invented the alarm clock. The saint used to sleep prostrate on his knees. Just to make sure that he wouldn't oversleep, he used to place a beeswax candle nearby and then press an iron nail into the side of the candle. When he was about to rest, he lit the candle, and as he took his brief nap, the candle burned down slowly until it reached the nail. When the heat of the flame had warmed and loosened the wax, the nail fell with a loud clatter onto a metal pot that was placed below the candle, thereby awakening the saint. Obviously, the saint was here following the advice of the Desert Fathers who used to say, "He that wishes to be saved contrives means."

Aside from being a wonderworker and an inventor, this saintly and unassuming hierarch is remarkable for possessing yet another distinction: He was the first Patriarch of Constantinople to be called "Ecumenical Patriarch." Emperor Maurice gave Saint John this title in the year 586.

The Byzantines loved titles. The general feeling seemed to be that the more and bigger, titles you had, the happier you were. And evidently, as the empire shrank, the titles became proportionately bigger. Hence, *Sebastos* (honorable) became *Isosebastos*, which in turn evolved into *Prorosebastos* which finally developed into the dread *Panhyperebastos* (All Supremely-honorable).

We must be careful, however, in understanding the implications of this new title, "ecumenical Patriarch." In those days Constantinople was *the* "ecumenical" city, that is to say, it was the religious, political, spiritual, economic, and legislative center of the *oecumene* (literally, "the inhabited" world) – that is, the Roman Empire. The title "ecumenical" was not used exclusively by patriarchs alone. There was also, for example, an "Ecumenical Librarian" in Constantinople. Since the *oecumene* was the empire, the word "ecumenical" carried the significance of "imperial." Therefore, the Ecumenical Librarian, despite his intimidating title, was simply the chief librarian of the Imperial City. He did not, by this title, assume authority over all the other librarians of the empire. Thus, too, the Ecumenical Patriarch was simply the bishop of the Imperial City. He was not, as we sometimes hear today, the "leader of World Orthodoxy." Likewise, the Ecumenical Councils were not local diocesan councils, but councils of bishops from the whole oecumene, i.e. the empire, imperial councils called together by imperial decree.

By mistake – or was it perhaps by Divine Providence? – Saint John's new title "Ecumenical Patriarch" was translated into Latin as *Universal Patriarch*. Here is where some of the papacy's troubles began. Today's papacy, that is.

To begin with, Saint John did not ask for the new title. It was imposed on him by the emperor. Saint John did not even want to become patriarch, and initially he had resisted strenuously against receiving the office even after he had been elected. He just wanted to be a simple monk; he had been near the patriarchate long enough to know what a thankless and all-consuming task being a bishop is.

Pope Saint Gregory the Great did not know Saint John personally; he did not know that Saint John had not assumed this title himself, nor that he had not even wanted to become patriarch, and that he was not the power-hungry, ambition-driven despot that his supposed new title “Universal Patriarch” seemed to imply. Alarmed at the thought that one bishop was claiming to himself authority over all the other bishops, Saint Gregory wrote to Saint John. Thus, history has bequeathed to us these incredibly beautiful letters written by the saintly pope, letters which gently but firmly demolish the foundations of the papacy in the West as it later came to be known and hated.

Behold how Saint Gregory the Pope of Rome wrote to Saint John the Patriarch of Constantinople:

I pray you, therefore, reflect that by your bold presumption the peace of the whole Church is troubled, and that you are at enmity with that grace which was given to all in common. The more you grow in that grace, the more humble you will be in your own eyes; you will be the greater in proportion as you are further removed from usurping this extravagant and vainglorious title. You will be the richer as you seek less to despoil your brethren to your profit. Therefore, dearly beloved brother, love humility with all your heart. It is that which insures peace among the brethren, and which preserves unity in the Holy Catholic Church . . . What will you say to Christ, Who is the Head of the universal Church — what will you say to Him at the last judgment — you who, by your title of *universal*, would bring all His members into subjection to yourself? Whom, I pray you tell me, whom do you imitate by this perverse title if not [Lucifer] who, despising the legions of angels, his companions, endeavored to mount to the highest?.

And in another letter:

But if anyone usurp in the Church a title which embraces all the faithful, the universal Church — O blasphemy! — will then fall with him, since he makes himself to be called the universal. May all Christians reject this blasphemous title — this title which takes the sacerdotal honor from every priest the moment it is insanely usurped by one!

We cannot say, as some have contended, that Saint Gregory was, after a manner of speaking, reserving to himself the prerogative of “Universal Bishop.” An African council, in an ill-considered decision, had offered a like title to the bishops of Rome, so to honor, the holy Apostle Peter, as they supposed. And what was the response of the See of Rome? It refused this unfitting title! Saint Gregory explained that the See of Rome had refused the honor “lest, by conferring a special matter upon one alone, all priests should be deprived of the honor which is their due. How, then, while we are not ambitious of the glory of a title that has been offered to us, does another to whom no one has offered it, have the presumption to take it?”

Thus, letter after devastating letter, like a deadly artillery barrage, Pope Saint Gregory the Great’s epistles to the Orthodox bishops of his day fall with point-blank accuracy upon today’s “infallible” popes, with their claims to supremacy as “successors” of Saint Peter’s throne in the Vatican City.

In his monumental book *The Papacy*, Abbe Guettee — a French Roman Catholic priest and scholar of the last century who later joined himself to the true Catholic Church, the Orthodox

Catholic Church — deals with this and many other historical incidents which bring into sharp relief the contrast between the ancient See of Rome and today's Vatican. No Orthodox Christian home should be without this valuable and informative book.

In conclusion, we solemnly observe that the moral of this story could very well be formulated in the following terms, to wit:

Timely mistranslations, and patriarchs who invent alarm clocks, have alarmed and caused more popes to lose sleep than anything else.

May Christ Our True God, through the intercessions of Saint John the Faster, the first Ecumenical Patriarch, and Saint Gregory the Great the Pope of Rome, have mercy and save us. Amen. So be it.

Holy Transfiguration Monastery

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