

**PAPAL INFALLIBILITY AND
SUPREMACY TRIED BY
ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY,
SCRIPTURE AND REASON**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649666904

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Arthur Edward Gayer

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Cover @ 2017

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TRIED BY

Ecclesiastical History, Scripture, and Reason.

BY

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"If the Catholic Church were not infallible, obedience to it might be the worst  
of bondage."

"The Catholic Church is either supreme, or it is nothing, or it is worse than  
nothing; an imposture and an usurpation."—*Archbishop Manning.*



LONDON :

PARTRIDGE AND CO., 9, PATERNOSTER ROW;

EDINBURGH :

GEORGE MCGIBBON, 53, ROSE STREET;

DUBLIN :

HODGES, FOSTER, AND CO., 104, GRAFTON STREET.

1877.

110. 92. 511.

## TWO THEORIES.

### CHAPTER I.

If the theory of a divinely-appointed Papal Supremacy were true, historians would testify that such supremacy was universally recognised in the primitive Church. The testimony of Theodoret, Sulpitius Severus, and Eusebius, the earliest ecclesiastichistorians, and the Nicene Canons, prove that the authority of the Bishop of Rome was very limited.

THOUGH it should ever be held in mind, that the *onus probandi* in every discussion lies on those who assert an affirmative proposition, and consequently on those who bring forward such doctrines as those of Infallibility and Supremacy, yet it will probably be found in this case, that there are facts and arguments on the negative side, which when maturely considered, are calculated to clear the way towards a fair and satisfactory solution of the matters in dispute.

If the Supremacy of the Bishop of Rome were an institution of our Lord Himself, and not, as alleged by Protestants, *the tardy result of continual encroachment on the right of other Churches*, the further back we went, the more clearly we should be able to trace the powers of that Church as undisputed, and universally recognised by all others. If, on the contrary, our Lord did not institute any such Supremacy, but intended each Church to mould its own constitution, subject only to the Divine verities recorded in the sacred Scriptures, without being subject to any supreme local See, then we may fairly presume that if we go

back, behind the period of successful encroachment, we shall find other Churches acting independently of the Church of Rome, and denying her right to dictate either in points of doctrine or practice to those who were not (according to the divine laws and institutions of Christianity) subordinate to them.

Before consulting the records of history, two cases are equally possible, and might each account for the actual state of things existing at the present day. The one is that in the origin of Christianity, Rome was *universally admitted* to be the mistress of all other Churches, but that in later and more degenerate times, as heresies and schisms arose, a considerable number of other local Churches *rebelled* against her lawful and Divine authority; the other, that our Lord and his apostles gave the Church of Rome no supremacy over other Churches, but that that Church availed itself of its superior wealth and favourable situation at the ancient seat of empire, gradually to *usurp* a power which Christ never gave her, and that thus she was, by a gradual system of persevering encroachment, at last able to grasp an universal power over the whole Church, and practically for a considerable period to exercise it over a large part of it.

Which of these two theories is borne out by historical facts is the real question.

Let us begin with Italy.

If the Church of Rome were by Divine appointment the mistress of all other Churches, we may fairly conclude that those of Italy, at least, were no exceptions, and that her Divine supremacy was there, at least, at all times universally acknowledged.

The dogmas of faith are by a certain class of theo-

logians in modern times admittedly not as old as Christianity, but asserted to have been from time to time *developed* by the Church as Christianity grew and became matured under its fostering care. But here, at least, such a doctrine is inapplicable; and to introduce the theory of development to explain the growth of the Church itself, would simply be to admit the Protestant solution of the difficulty, by tracing the supremacy of the Pope to *encroachment* instead of *Divine right*.

The question in this aspect is simply one of historical fact, and must obviously be decided simply by historical evidence.

Is it, then, historically true that the whole of Italy has from the earliest times acknowledged the supremacy of Rome?

Italy from very early times was divided into two great provinces—1st, the Italick Diocese, which comprehended the present kingdom of Lombardy, and the other countries subject to the empire south of the Danube, of which Milan was the metropolis; and, 2ndly, that of Rome, which comprised Tuscany, the recent States of the Church, Naples, Sicily, and the Mediterranean islands of Sardinia and Corsica, usually known as the *Loca Suburbicaria*.

Under the Roman Empire the former was placed under the civil government of a Prætorian prefect; the latter under the jurisdiction of a City prefect, whose power extended not only to the city itself, but to those adjacent provinces which were usually called the Suburbican, or suburban regions, and which we find from a rescript of the Emperor Severus extended to a distance of one hundred miles round Rome.



This civil division was in early times adopted as the measure of ecclesiastical jurisdiction also, the Bishop of *Rome* having sway over the city of Rome and the Suburbican provinces annexed to it, while the Bishop of the Italic Diocese, of which the metropolis was Milan, had undisputed sway over the rest of Italy.

Thus we find the earliest ecclesiastical historians, Theodoret, Eusebius, and Sulpitius Severus, and also the most ancient versions of the canons of the General Council of Nice, treating the matter.

Theodoret ("Ecc. Hist.," i. 2, c. 15, p. 91) styles Dionysius, Bishop of Milan, Bishop of the metropolis of Italy, and refers to him and Liberius, Bishop of Rome, as having been seized and driven into exile because they would not coincide in the Arian heresy. St. Athanasius, in like manner, in his history of the Arians, and also in his second apology before the Council of Milan, speaks of the Bishops assembled from Rome *and* Italy, meaning by the latter the bishops of the Italic diocese, as contradistinguished from those of the diocese of Rome.

Sulpitius Severus, in his sacred history (lib. 2, p. 441), referring to the heretic Priscilian and his associates, says—"They addressed themselves to Damasus, Bishop of Rome, and Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, as the BISHOPS who had the greatest authority in those days;" plainly treating them as the respective heads of the two great dioceses already referred to.

So Eusebius, in his Ecclesiastical History (lib. 7, c. 30, p. 231), tells us that when Paul of Samosata, Bishop of Antioch, refused to give Domnus possession of that church, an appeal was made, not to the Bishop of Rome, but to the Emperor Aurelian, who referred

it to the decision of the Bishops of Rome AND Italy. I might easily multiply instances, but think we need not heap up authorities on this head of the argument, as Ruffinus, the ecclesiastical historian, seems to place the matter beyond doubt when, in epitomizing the sixth canon of the first General Council (that of Nice, A.D. 325, at which no less than 318 bishops attended), the very earliest record of the privileges of the Roman See, he tells us that "according to ancient custom, the Bishop of Alexandria had the care of the churches in Egypt, just as the Bishop of Rome had the care and charge of the *suburbican* churches." ("Hist. Ecc.," Lib. 1, c. 6, p. 236.)

That Ruffinus could not have been mistaken as to the sense of the Nicene canon, or as to the province of the Bishop of Rome, is plain, because he was himself an Italian, born not above twenty years after the Council of Nice, and a presbyter of the Church of Aquileia, a city in constant intercourse with Rome—a writer whose works have always been deemed of the highest credit, and approved of by Popes, Fathers, and Councils, and who could never have dared to limit the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome to such narrow limits as the suburbican regions, had not his power at the time been notoriously known to have been confined within these limits.

Justellus also gives us a very ancient paraphrase of the Nicene canons, from which the same thing appears—viz., that the Bishop of Rome had a primacy over the province of Rome and the Suburbican places by ancient custom; and, in like manner, the Bishop of Alexandria had power over Egypt, Libya, and Pentapolis, and the Bishop of Antioch in the countries

adjoining it; and the Greek scholiasts reiterate substantially the same thing.

To come, however, to more modern authorities, it will not be difficult to show that the primacy of the Popes was disputed for many centuries after the Council of Nice, throughout every part of Italy which lay outside the boundaries I have already mentioned, and I shall proceed in the next chapter to try this by taking three of the most distinguished cities in Northern Italy outside the borders of the Suburbican provinces—Milan, Aquileia, and Ravenna—and see whether *they* admitted or disputed the supremacy claimed by the Bishop of Rome.