

## Communique on Dropping of Papal Title

### *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*

In a March 22 communique, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity discussed the suppression of the papal title "patriarch of the West" in the 2006 edition of the Vatican yearbook. The following translation of the communique was provided by the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

In the 2006 edition of the *Annuario Pontificio*, in the list of the pope's titles the title "patriarch of the West" was left out. This absence has been commented on in various ways and requires a clarification.

Without claiming to consider the complex historical question of the title of patriarch in all its aspects, it can be affirmed that from the historical perspective, the ancient patriarchates of the East, defined by the councils of Constantinople (381) and of Chalcedon (451), covered a fairly clearly demarcated territory. At the same time, the territory of the see of the bishop of Rome remained somewhat vague. In the East, under the ecclesiastical imperial system of Justinian (527-565), alongside the four Eastern patriarchates (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem), the pope was included as the patriarch of the West. Rome, on the other hand, favored the idea of the three Petrine episcopal sees: Rome, Alexandria and Antioch. Without using the title "patriarch of the West," the Fourth Council of Constantinople (869-870), the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and the Council of Florence (1439) listed the pope as the first of the then five patriarchs.

The title "patriarch of the West" was adopted in the year 642 by Pope Theodore. Thereafter it appeared only occasionally and did not have a clear meaning. It flourished in the 16th and 17th centuries in the context of a general increase in the pope's titles and appeared for the first time in the *Annuario Pontificio* in 1863.

The term West currently refers to a cultural context not limited only to Western Europe but including North America, Australia and New Zealand, thus differentiating itself from other cultural contexts. Obviously, such a meaning of the term West does not intend to describe an ecclesiastical territory, nor can it be adopted as the definition of a patriarchal territory. If we wished to give the term West a meaning applicable to ecclesiastical juridical language, it could be understood only in reference to the Latin Church. In this way, the title

"patriarch of the West" would describe the bishop of Rome's special relationship with the Latin Church and could express the special jurisdiction he has over her.

As a consequence, the title "patriarch of the West," never very clear, over history has become obsolete and practically unusable. It seems pointless, then, to insist on maintaining it. Even more so now that the Catholic Church, with Vatican Council II, has found, in the form of episcopal conferences and their international meetings, the canonical structure best suited to the needs of the Latin Church today.

Abandoning the title "patriarch of the West" clearly does not alter in any way the recognition of the ancient patriarchal churches, so solemnly declared by Vatican Council II (*Lumen Gentium*, 23). Still less could the suppression of the title be taken as implying new claims. The renouncement of this title intends to express a historical and theological realism and, at the same time, is the renunciation of a claim that could prove useful to ecumenical dialogue.

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