The Origin of the Episcopal Office Vis-à-vis Apostolic Succession: A Retrace of Patristic Documents.

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Abstract
This article attempts to discuss the origin of the Episcopal office in relation to Apostolic Succession, tracing its origins to the Patristic age and Episcopal succession, which means that the office of bishops could be traced to apostolic times. Here, the author intends to employ the descriptive and analytic methods of research to explore the subject matter. This write-up does not intend to discuss the office of the Bishop in all its ramifications, but limits itself to the process involved in choosing a bishop. This, the author hopes to achieve by exploring patristic documents that furnish us with such information. The author creates awareness about the prerequisites in choosing ecclesiastical leaders, especially the Episcopal office. The article concludes by making two salient points: that from the beginning, there have always been considerations as regards choice and suitability for assuming church leadership and that the office of the bishop could be traced to apostolic times.

Key words: episcopacy, apostolicity, apostolic succession, suitability, choice

1.0. Introduction

The Episcopal office, *ab initio*, has always been important as far as leadership in the Church is concerned. However, this office, as we understand it today, is not what it used to be at the early stage of the Church.

The choice of the topic for the topic of this article is a deliberate attempt to create awareness as regards the origin of this office. Above all, it sets out to discuss the prerequisites for occupying this noble office. One thing this article sets out to achieve is to create awareness about the fact that bishops at the early stage of the Church functioned as parish priests as we understand them in today's context. This means that they were in charge of a church just as a parish priest operates today. It was a later development that they operate as we have it today, whereby a bishop resides in the city centre with multiple churches under his care and jurisdiction. Meyendorff (1989) describes this reality in clear terms thus:

> Already in the third century, bishops, especially in larger cities, had ceased to be the only regular celebrants of the Eucharist- as this was originally the

> case…and their leadership gradually lost some of its immediate pastoral and sacramental character, to become a ministry of teaching and government over several Eucharistic communities. Originally, the bishop headed a single community-like the parish priest today- and such communities were often quite small.

Besides, this article also intends to furnish information about the fact that the title bishop derives from the Greek words ***ἐπίσκοπος*** (*epískopos*), which means "an overseer" or "a supervisor", and ***Πρεσβύτερος*** (*presbýteros*), which means "a priest" or "an elder." The Latin equivalents for these titles are ***Sacerdos*** and ***Episcopus,*** respectively. As we shall see, these titles were first applied to chosen leaders saddled with the responsibility of seeing to the affairs or caretakers of churches founded by the apostles. This is to say that these titles for church leaders were not initially acquired through the rite of ordination, but by appointment. It was in the second century that the rite of ordination for the three offices of bishop, priest and deacon was introduced. The letters of Ignatius of Antioch, generally dated to about 115, are the first Christian documents that witness to the presence of a bishop who is clearly distinct from the presbyterate and is the pastor of the whole church of a city. In other words, it was during this period that the threefold structure became generally the rule, with a bishop, assisted by presbyters, presiding over each local church (*cf.* Papandrea, 2012; Sullivan, 2001). This and other things concerning the Episcopal office we shall discuss.

2.0. Choice, expectations and suitability for the Episcopal Office

Early Church documents offer information with regard to choice or suitability for the Episcopal office. We shall take a look at four (4) documents in this regard:

2.1. The Didache

This is the earliest document that furnishes information about church leadership in general and the expectations from such leaders. This document identifies two (2) distinct ministries, namely, local and itinerant. Bishops and deacons are elected local residential leaders (*cf. Did*. 15.1). This we see in Pauline communities or churches that Paul founded (Phil. 1:1). The New Testament contains good evidence that the churches founded by St. Paul had local leaders, to whom the apostle urged the community to be submissive. In the salutation of his letter to the Philippians, Paul made no special mention of the *episkopoi* and *diakonoi*: terms that literally mean "bishops and deacons." During his final journey to Jerusalem, Paul gave a farewell address to the leaders of the church of Ephesus, whom Luke calls "presbyters," but whom he has Paul describe as having been appointed *episkopoi* by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:17-35). So there is good evidence that during the period of the New Testament, Christian churches had local leaders, some of whom, at least, were called "bishops." In other words, leadership and other ministries were provided in each local church by a group of "elders" or "overseers" (*cf.* Sullivan, 2001).

On the other hand, as in Paul's writings (Rom 16:7; 1 Cor 12:8), apostles, prophets and teachers belong to the itinerant ministry whose activities take a missionary dimension as they move from place to place preaching and establishing basic Christian communities or small churches.

In both ministries, there are expectations in terms of the conduct of those involved in either of them. Consequently, choice or suitability for those who embrace such ministries becomes an important factor. Didache 15.1 and 2 contain Instructions about the Choice of resident or local ministers who live with the people they administer to. As regards the choice of such ministers, it states:

> … Choose for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men who are humble and not avaricious and true and approved, for they too carry out for you the ministry of the prophets and teachers. You must not, therefore, despise them, for they are your honoured men, along with the prophets and teachers.

Hence, the above instruction emphasises suitability or worthiness in terms of worthy behaviour, possession of the virtue of humility, and discipline with respect to material things. Therefore, the emphasis here is on credible leaders.

However, it is important to note that this instruction further implies that such men must command respect from those they serve, since they operate at the same level as the Apostles and Prophets. This means that the respect must be earned. And this can only happen when they manifest the expectations and virtues of their ministry.

The Didache goes further to distinguish between acceptable and non-acceptable conduct for itinerant ministers: some help and some exploit (Did. 11.3-6). And as regards the involvement of the members of the community, the Didache indicates that the community elects bishops and deacons, who offer instruction on how to judge who is a true prophet and who is false. True prophets have a charismatic role. At the same time, they are responsible for the tradition that they received, as well as for its development under their leadership.

2.2. Apostolic Tradition of Hypolytus of Rome (C. 165 – C. 235).
This is another early document that makes a revelation with respect to choice and suitability as regards the office of the bishop. It states the prerequisites for ordination into the Episcopal office. According to Hippolytus, "the consecration of a bishop takes place on Sunday after he has been chosen by all the people and in the most public manner possible" (Quasten, 1952). This document, which existed in the third century, states this in clear terms:

> Let the bishop be ordained after he has been chosen by all the people. When he has been named and shall please all, let him, with the presbytery and such bishops as may be present, assemble with the people on a Sunday. While all give their consent, the bishops shall lay their hands upon him, and the presbytery shall stand by in silence. All indeed shall keep silent, praying in their heart for the descent of the Spirit.

The early Church saw the choice of a priest from and by the people as a divine mandate. This is to ascertain the credibility and suitability of the candidate for the respected office of the priesthood.

2.3. Cyprian's Epistle 67

Cyprian was the bishop of Carthage and lived in the third century (210 - 258). His Letter 67 was written in AD 254. Even though it addresses a different crisis concerning two deposed bishops in Spain, part of it, however, is very emphatic on the choice of church leaders based on the approval or confirmation of the people of God. This epistle expresses it thus:

> **...** We observe to come from divine authority, that the priest should be chosen in the presence of the people under the eyes of all, and should be approved worthy and suitable by public judgment and testimony…[in] Numbers 20:25-26 God commands a priest to be appointed in the presence of all the assembly; that is, He instructs and shows that the ordination of priests ought not to be solemnized except with the knowledge of the people standing near, that in the presence of the people either the crimes of the wicked may be disclosed, or the merits of the good may be declared, and the ordination, which shall have been examined by the suffrage and judgment of all, may be just and legitimate (*Cypr. Ep.* 67, 4).

The above emphasises not only the credibility and suitability of the candidate but also the validity of the ordination. Therefore, a valid ordination is one approved or confirmed, not only by already ordained church leaders, but also by the confirmation of the people of God, since the voice of the people at times represents the voice of God, ***Vox populi, vox Dei***.

This Letter considers this a tradition that must be maintained as divine instruction and apostolic tradition following Peter's speech before the election of Matthias, who replaced Judas (*cf.* Acts 1:12-26). This was to be observed not only in the ordinations of bishops and priests, but also in those of deacons so that no unworthy person might creep into the ministry of the altar or into the office of a priest. This Letter by Cyprian states this clearly:

> For which reason you must diligently observe and keep the practice delivered from divine tradition and apostolic observance, which is also maintained among us, and almost throughout all the provinces; that for the proper celebration of ordinations all the neighbouring bishops of the same province should assemble with that people for which a prelate is ordained. And the bishop should be chosen in the presence of the people, who have most fully known the life of each one, and have looked into the doings of each one as respects his habitual conduct (*Cyp. Ep.* 67, 5).

Again, the above quotation indicates the involvement of the people of God as a prerequisite for the validity of the ordination of church leaders, especially ordination for the Episcopal office.

2.4. Jerome (c. 347- c. 419)

About choice and suitability for the Episcopal office, Jerome says:

> The bishop, then, must be without reproach, so that he is the slave of no vice: the husband of one wife, that is, in the past, not in the present; sober, or better, vigilant…; chaste…; distinguished, both by chastity and conduct:

> hospitable,…; apt to teach, for it profits nothing to enjoy the consciousness of virtue, unless a man be able to instruct the people entrusted to him, so that he can exhort in doctrine, and refute the gainsayers; not a drunkard…No striker, that is, a striker of men's consciences, for the Apostle is not pointing out what a boxer, but a pontiff ought not to do. He directly teaches what he ought to do: but gentle, not contentious, no lover of money, one that rules well his own house, having his children in subjection with all chastity (*adv*. *Jov*. 1, 35).

Therefore, as regards suitability for the office of church leaders, St. Jerome emphasises the virtues expected of leaders who occupy such positions. He underscores the importance of manifesting virtues needed of a church leader. This he stated in clear terms thus: "…the blessedness of a bishop, priest, or deacon, does not lie in the fact that they are bishops, priests, or deacons, but in their having the virtues which their names and offices imply" (cf. *adv*. *Jov*. 1, 35).

2.4.1. The Choice of a Married Person for the Episcopal Office

Adversus Iovinianum also reveals that at some point in the history of the Church, married people were considered for the Episcopal office. In fact, in some instances, they were preferred over virgins. This is one claim Jovinian made to discredit the over-glorification of virginity or celibacy, which Jerome refuted in this work. In fact, Jovinian claimed that married people were chosen as bishops, as reflected in Timothy (*cf*. 1 Timothy 3:1-13). Here, St. Jerome argued that it was not a normal situation. He made the point that this was either as a result of the scarcity of virgins or that if a married man was preferred to a virgin, it meant that the latter was lacking in other qualities expected of one who occupies such an exalted office or that his choice was wrongly made. This he expresses thus:

> How is it, then, you will say, that frequently at the ordination of priests a virgin is passed over, and a married man taken? Perhaps because he lacks other qualifications in keeping with virginity, or it may be that he is thought a virgin, and is not: or there may be a stigma on his virginity, or at all events virginity itself makes him proud, and while he plumes himself on mere bodily chastity, he neglects other virtues; he does not cherish the poor: he is too fond of money. It sometimes happens that a man has a gloomy visage, a frowning brow, a walk as though he were in a solemn procession, and so offends the people, who, because they do not fault to find with his life, hate his mere dress and gait. Many are chosen not out of affection for themselves, but out of hatred for another. In most cases, the election is won by mere simplicity, while the shrewdness and discretion of another candidate elicit opposition as though they were evils. Sometimes the judgement of the common people is at fault, and in testing the qualities of the priesthood, the individual inclines to his own character, with the result that he looks not so much for a good candidate as for one like himself. (*adv. Iov*. 1, 34)

Thus, it is clear from the above that at some point there were married church leaders who were married before embracing the ecclesiastical leadership. However, in line with our discussions so far, worthy conduct and virtues expected of Church leaders were expected from such leaders.

3.0. Criticisms as regards the Appointment or Election of Bishops
Some patristic documents must offer criticisms about the process of electing or appointing a bishop. Here, we shall consider criticisms by Cyprian and Jerome.

3.1. Cyprian
Cyprian admits in his Letter 67 that at times, human factors play out in the election of ecclesiastical leaders. He sees this as not coming from God. He says:

> …unworthy persons are sometimes ordained, not according to the will of God, but according to human presumption, and that those things which do not come of a legitimate and righteous ordination are displeasing to God, God Himself manifests by Hosea the prophet, saying, They have set up for themselves a king, but not by me (Hosea 8:4) [*Cyp. Ep.* 67, 4)].

Cyprian, from the above quotation, sees this kind of choice as not coming from God and hence does not have divine approval. Therefore, he questions the validity of such ordinations.

3.2. Jerome
Jerome distinguished himself not just as a critique of the conduct of priests, but also of the process of electing or appointing one to occupy an ecclesiastical office. In his ***Adversus Iovinianum*** Book 1 nos. 34, he criticised what he considered a wrong choice arising from the negative influence of the choice of a bishop from the hierarchy of the Church. Jerome knew that his criticism would earn him hatred and enmity, but still went ahead to make his criticism since he believed in the testimony of a good conscience. He said:

> What I am going to say will perhaps offend many. Yet I will say it, and good men will not be angry with me, because they will not feel the sting of conscience. Sometimes it is the fault of the bishops, who choose into the ranks of the clergy not the best, but the cleverest men, and think the more simple as well as innocent ones incapable; or, as though they were distributing the offices of an earthly service, they give posts to their kindred and relations; or they listen to the dictates of wealth. And, worse than all, they give promotion to the clergy who besmear them with flattery (*adv. Iov.* 1, 34).

The above quotation, once again, reveals how the human factor plays out in the election of a bishop.

4.0. Apostolicity and Apostolic Succession
Our discussions so far point to the Apostolicity of the Church and also draw our attention to the idea of Apostolic Succession.

4.1. Apostolicity
This is one of the four (4) marks of the Church alongside One, Holy, and Catholic. When we say the Church is Apostolic, we are simply saying that it is built on an apostolic foundation and can be traced back to apostolic times.

4.1. The Concept of Apostolic Succession

The concept of apostolic succession, in a similar manner, means that the office of bishops can be traced back to apostolic times. To understand what we are saying, there is a need to introduce the concept of the primacy of Rome, which simply implies that from the early stage of the Church, churches all over the world were already recognising the Church of Rome as the Mother Church, where all other churches should align. Hence, this understanding of the primacy of Rome gives credence to our discussion on apostolic succession.

Talking about Apostolic succession, the Letter of Clement of Rome to the Church of Corinth becomes relevant here. It is our earliest source and witness to the claim of apostolic succession. What was the bone of contention that warranted the writing of this letter? The opening paragraph of the letter indicates that people from Corinth had appealed to Rome to settle disputes within their church, where a group of young men deposed the legitimate ruling elders in Corinth. Thus, these arrogant and impudent individuals had rebelled against ecclesiastical authority and driven the incumbents from office (Kesich, 2007; Aquilina, 2013). Only a very small minority of the community remained loyal to the deposed presbyters; Clement intended to settle the differences and to repair the scandal given to the pagans. Part of the opening paragraph states the problem thus:

> Owing, dear brethren, to the sudden and successive calamitous events which have happened to ourselves, we feel that we have been somewhat tardy in turning our attention to the points respecting which you consulted us; and especially to that shameful and detestable sedition, utterly abhorrent to the elect of God, which a few rash and self-confident persons have kindled to such a pitch of frenzy, that your venerable and illustrious name, worthy to be universally loved, has suffered grievous injury.

It should be noted that this Letter calls these deposed leaders "bishops", but they were identified as "elders" (Kesich, 2007).

Clement's concern in writing this Letter was to heal the schisms in Corinth and restore unity to the Church. As the bishop of Rome, Clement asserts his authority and influence by responding to the request of the Church of Corinth, emphasising the importance of apostolic succession, hierarchy, and the unity within the Church. He emphasises the importance of apostolic succession, tracing the lineage of the Corinthian clergy back to the apostles, underscoring the connection between the Roman church and the Apostolic Tradition.

Thus, as earlier stated, what is most apparent from the Letter to the Corinthians is the primacy or the pre-eminence given to the Church of Rome, even in the first Christian century. It reflects the idea of the Roman primacy, where the bishop of Rome has a special role in maintaining unity and promoting the welfare of the global church. The letter provides valuable insights into the early Christians'

understanding of church governance, the role of the bishop, and the primacy of Rome.

The most important thing about this letter is the tone of authority with which Clement writes. He assumes that the Christians in Corinth, who have their own leaders, should listen to the bishop of Rome and accept his advice. The reason being that this is so is based on the belief that the Church of Rome was founded by the apostle Peter, and that his authority as Jesus' right–hand man and leader of the apostles (Matt 16:18-19; John 21:15-17) is transferred to his successors in the city. This concept of the transfer of authority from apostles to bishops is known as apostolic succession. The assumption is that the first bishops of the Church were consecrated by the apostles, who handed down the mantle of authority and conferred the anointing of the Holy Spirit, in an unbroken line going back to Jesus himself. Subsequently, generations of bishops would in turn be ordained and consecrated by their predecessors in the succession, keeping the line of authority intact (*cf*. Papandrea, 2012).

Therefore, the important point to note is that even before the office of bishop in general evolved into the authoritative role that it would eventually become, the Church of Rome was already seen as the church with which anyone had to agree if they wanted to be considered part of the universal Church.

5.0. Conclusion

From all that has been said so far, it is clear that the Episcopal office started with the appointment of overseers and elders who provided leadership for basic Christian communities established or founded by apostles during their missionary journeys. These leaders were the ones who were initially addressed as *Episcopos* and *presbyteros*. However, theirs was by appointment. It was in the second century that the rite for ordination existed, and the titles were maintained for resident bishops who first functioned as Parish priests but later, because of the need for more workers, ceased to be parish priests but were still resident in the city centre, this time to oversee or supervise all churches under their jurisdiction. Simply put, the bishop as understood in the early stage of the Church was a resident pastor in charge of a particular church, as does the Parish priest today, but with the passage of time, he became a residential pastor who presides stably over the church in a city and its environs.

This article also established the fact that the church has always been orderly. This we saw in the aspect of leadership. Persons who occupy ecclesiastical office must exhibit some level of credibility. Hence, occupying an ecclesiastical office is one thing, but possessing the qualities expected of one in such an exalted office is another.

Finally, the notion of Apostolic Succession reveals that the Episcopal office can be traced back to apostolic times in an unbroken line of Episcopal ordination from Christ through the apostles down through the centuries to the bishops today.

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- Jerome's Adversum Jovinianum