

“IS THE POPE GOD?”:
CORRECTING POPULAR CLAIMS
OF PAPAL BLASPHEMY

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Many Adventists claim that Catholics call the pope “God,” or worship him as such. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Even if one ultimately disagrees with papal authority, it is important to recognize what the pope *is* and *is not* in Catholic thought. This paper will attempt to clarify some misunderstood practices and statements.

1. *Addressing the pope as “your holiness” is blasphemous.*

In fact, there is nothing wrong in identifying another Christian “holy.” God has “sanctified” (i.e., made holy) those who have been baptized (1 Cor. 6:11); thus, they are worthy to be called “holy” (1 Cor. 3:16-17). Indeed, Paul most often addresses the Christians to whom he writes as “holy ones” (Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2). Christian clergy, in particular, are called to their ministries because they are “holy” (Tit. 1:8). In view of all these factors, addressing a Christian minister as “holy” is entirely appropriate.¹

Of course, some Adventists take issue with the fact that the “your holiness” is used particularly of the pope. However, one should consider the arbitrary character of all the titles or appellations applied in Catholicism: e.g., “your beatitude,” “excellency,” “reverend” “servant of God,” “venerable,” “blessed,” “holy,” “beatitude,” “monsignor,” “father,” “mother,” “brother,” etc. If an individual is “holy,” is he not also “venerable?” If he is called “beatitude,” is he not “blessed” (the titles are literally equivocal, though they are not applied to the same individuals²)? These

1. Of course, many Catholics agree “your holiness” primarily invokes the holiness of the papal office. Similarly, individual judges (however honorable or dishonorable their character) are addressed as “your honor” in view of the respect due their office.

2. The former is used for those departed who have been beatified; the latter is used as a form of address for Eastern Catholic patriarchs.

are arbitrary forms of address. Their specialization in Catholic custom does not imply exclusivity. These titles only highlight a particular attribute of the individual or office, but one likely characteristic of other individuals or offices.³

Again, the key issue is whether the form of address “your holiness” is blasphemous, as many Adventists suppose. Clearly, based upon all the biblical evidence, it is not, irrespective of whether it is applied to a layperson, a monk, or even the pope.

2. Catholics worship the pope as God. For instance, they bow to the pope, and kiss the pope’s ring, foot or hand.

It is written: “Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed down and kissed him” (Ex. 18:7). Biblically, “bowing,” even with one’s face to the ground, is a perfectly legitimate gesture of respect and honor for a father (Gen 48:12), ruler (Gen 27:29; 42:6; 43:26; 49:8; 2 Sam 14:33), warrior (2 Sam 18:21), friend (1 Sam 20:41), or prophet (2 Kings 2:15; 4:37; 1 Sam 28:14). Kissing is also a legitimate gesture of honor (1 Sam 10:1; Ps 2:12). However, such a gesture is inappropriate when offered to any being as a form of “worshipping” them as divine (e.g., illegitimate bowing before an angel in Rev 19:10; 22:8). Thus, the gesture itself is neutral; it only becomes inappropriate when it conveys a spirit of adoration such as is due God alone. Since both legitimate and illegitimate forms of bowing look alike, however, one cannot judge on appearances; intent is the key variable.

However, Catholics do not believe the pope is “God” (see below). They also *emphatically* deny that any earthly creature or thing deserves the adoration due God.⁴ Catholics bow or kiss their leaders precisely as is due a father, ruler, friend, or religious leader in the biblical tradition. The fact that most Adventists condemn these practices more likely illustrates their unfamiliarity with biblical custom.

Analogously, “saint” and “holy/holiness” are literally equivocal, though no pope is formally addressed as “saint _____.”

3. As an additional example, the pope (a bishop) and priests are addressed as “father,” but bishops (who rank above priests) are not. Again, Catholic forms of address are arbitrary.

4. Catholics distinguish between the homage given to God and those given to all else. According to the Definition of the II Nicene Council, “full adoration [latria] in accordance with our faith. . . is properly paid only to the divine nature,” all else can receive merely “salutation or respectful veneration.” The Council of Trent also states, “we adore Christ; and we venerate the saints, whose similitude they bear” (Session 25).

3. *It is also blasphemous to consider the pope the “vicar of Christ.”*

Actually, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, all bishops, are “vicars and legates of Christ.”⁵ (The *Catechism* also refers to the human conscience as “the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.”⁶) A “vicar” is an agent, deputy, or representative⁷ —one who acts on behalf of, and in the authority of, another. A “vicar of Christ” represents, and exercises the authority of, Christ.

The apostle Paul, for one, claimed to act with the authority of Christ:

For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord. (1 Cor. 5:3-5)

Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ. (2 Cor. 2:10)

Paul excommunicates or pardons “in the presence of the Lord Jesus,”⁸ “in the name of the Lord Jesus,”⁹ and “in the power of our Lord Jesus.” This

5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 894,1560. The idea is ancient in the Christian tradition, dating to the very end of the apostolic era: “your bishop presides in the place of God” (Ignatius of Antioch, Epistle to the Magnesians, 6).

Also, of note: the pope is the “vicar of Christ” in a more pronounced way, due to the singularity of his office as visible “pastor of the universal Church” (CCC 882). During his earthly ministry, Christ was the visible pastor of the universal Church. Before his ascension, however, Christ committed the care of the entire flock to Peter, commanding him to “feed” Christ’s “lambs,” “tend” his “sheep,” and “feed” his “sheep” (Mt. 16:15-17), and “strengthen” the “brothers” (Lk. 22:32).

6. CCC, 1778.

7. Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Accessed Online), “Vicar.”

8. To act “in the presence” or “sight” of another often denotes deputation (cf. Rev. 13:12,14; NASB, AV).

9. To act “in the name” also indicates that one acts with their compete authority (cf. Esth. 8:8).

is a *vicarious* exercise of Christ's own authority to pronounce judgment or forgiveness (an authority the Corinthians themselves will vicariously exercise on behalf of Paul, in his absence). Christ Himself endowed the Church with this authority to act in His name in matters of church discipline (Mt. 18:15-20), assuring his disciples of heaven's consent: "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt. 18:18).

Paul commands Christians "in the name of Jesus":

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. (2 Thess. 3:6)

Again, Paul exercised Christ's own authority throughout his public ministry. Bishops (those ordained in the apostolic succession) claim to speak and act with the same authority.

Now, Protestants rightfully consider the Holy Spirit the "vicar of Christ" *par excellence* even though the term is used nowhere in scripture. Some use it to exclude the claim that a human being can be a "vicar of Christ" as well. But notice: Protestants apply that title "vicar of Christ" to the Holy Spirit precisely because he is sent "in [Christ's] name" (Jn. 14:26), to declare what Christ tells Him to declare (Jn. 16:13-14). Of course, Christ endowed all the apostles with the power to speak and act in His name (cf. 1 Cor. 5:3-5; Jn 14:13-14; Acts 3:6, 4:18; 16:18), and declare His teaching (Mt. 28:20). In that light, are they not also subordinate "vicars of Christ": speaking and acting on behalf of Christ? Is not the entire Church a "vicar of Christ" to the world? Thus, one cannot deny that Christians can function as visible "vicars of Christ," simply because the Holy Spirit (who empowers them) is the "vicar of Christ" *par excellence*.

4. Catholics explicitly claim the pope is "God."

When discussing bible prophecy, Adventist evangelists often cite various sources that ascribe divine prerogatives or titles to the pope (often, scandalously, at least at first glance). Having startled their audiences, they triumphantly declare the papacy is guilty of blasphemy.

When examining the significance of such quotes, it is first important to establish their authenticity.¹⁰ Then, one must assert that the sources

10. Of note, Adventist evangelists rarely seek out the purported sources of these quotes to verify their authenticity, creating an environment ripe for the spread of some fabricated quotes. A Catholic confronted with these quotes should demand the Adventist verify whether the quotes are authentic from the original Catholic sources.

are authoritative, and thus, authentic representations of “Church teaching.” The Church has a distinct teaching office (the “magisterium”), composed of “the pope” and the “college” or body of “bishops” in agreement with him (the latter exercising their magisterial authority “above all in an ecumenical council”).¹¹ Any presentation of Catholic Church teaching must cite magisterial texts (e.g., the decrees of ecumenical councils, the official writings of popes, etc.). Of note, the Catholic faith recognizes that the private theological opinions of popes (even when published) are not authoritative unless they are presented as an actual exercise of his magisterium (i.e., as encyclicals, apostolic letters, etc.).¹² They are certainly not infallible unless they satisfy all the conditions proposed by the I Vatican Council.¹³ (These facts should go far in demonstrating that the pope is cer-

The possibility of later scribal error, interpolation, or forgery is also significant. For instance, the construction “our Lord God the Pope” is found in certain, late copies of the “Extravagantes” of John XXII. However, the original 14th-Century text, preserved at the Vatican library, only reads “our lord the Pope.” The corruption of the text is discussed in: Franz Gillmann, “Dominus Deus noster Papa”? *Archiv für katholisches Kirchenrecht* 95 [1915], 266-282.

As an aside, the use of the honorific “lord” with the pope in the original text is hardly problematic. The English honorific “sir” is literally equivocal (Fr. *sire* [lit. lord], *messire* [lit. my lord]) as are the Spanish and Portugese honorifics “señor,” “don,” and “dom” [also, “lord,” from *dominum*]. An extended discussion of the “Extravagantes,” written by Sean Hyland, may be accessed at: <<http://seanhyland.wordpress.com/2009/01/04/the-truth-about-the-anti-catholic-charge-of-lord-god-the-pope/>> (Accessed Online, 6 January 2006).

11. CCC, 888-892.

12. Johnson, Kevin Orlin, *Why Do Catholics Do That?* (New York: Random House, 1994), 113-114. As a modern example, in the preface to his best-selling *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI indicates that the book is not a production of the teaching office of the Church: “I do not think it is necessary to say expressly that this book is not at all a magisterial act, but the expression of my personal seeking of the “Lord's face” (Psalm 27:8). Therefore, every one has the liberty to contradict me.”

13. That infallibility is promised in those instances in which “the Roman pontiff speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when, [1] in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, [2] in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, [3] he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole church. . . .” (Session 4, ch. 4, 9). These conditions were set to exclude the extremist opinion that infallibility is “personal or absolute,” as if attached “to any and every formal utterance of the pope” (Livingston, James C., Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Modern*

tainly not “divine” in Catholic thought.)

Unfortunately, Adventists often publicize papal claims made by individuals with no doctrinal authority. Worse, Adventists often select only the most fantastic quotes on the papacy as representative of Catholic “teaching,” while omitting the concurrent opinions of individuals with more modest, or even critical, points of view (who were far in the majority). For the sake of comparison, consider how unfair it would be to characterize Seventh-day Adventism entire by the ideas and publications of some conservative, ultra-conservative, or offshoot Adventists. Instead, care must be exercised to accurately represent the official teachings of a particular religious group. The words of Catholic popes, prelates, clergy, canonists, reporters, and writers cannot be presented as representative of Catholic teaching, unless one can corroborate their testimony with *explicit doctrinal statements from recognized magisterial texts*.

Not surprisingly, once this rule is respected, most of the “papal claims” that scandalize Adventists vanish. Those that remain need only minor clarification to remove any remaining scandal. One such quote that has troubled Adventists comes from the lips of Nicholas I:

The appellation of god had been confirmed by Constantine on the Pope, who being god, cannot be judged by man.¹⁴

Again, Catholics do not believe that the pope is God Himself, or that God dwells “in” the pope any more than He indwells all Christians (Rom. 8:9). The pope is a human being like us all; thus, “the Pope confesses his sins regularly once a week.”¹⁵

Instead, to understand the quote, one must carefully examine its origin:

A saying ascribed to Constantine, at the Council of Nice, in a legend recorded by Rufinus, was amplified. . . . Constantine, according to this fable, when the written accusations of the bishops against each other were laid before him, burned them, saying, in allusion to a verse of the Psalter, that the bishops were gods, and no

Christian Thought [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006], 339). For instance, the Council rejected the radical claim that “when the Pope thinks, it is God thinking in him,” proposed by Veillot (Livingston, 333).

14. Labb IX Dist.: 96 Can 7 Satis Evidentur Decret Gratian Primer Para.

15 Willey, David, “Fewer Confessions and New Sins,” BBC News (Accessed Online) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7287071.stm>>. The practice of confessing one’s sins to Jesus Christ in the presence of a priest is not the practice of a human being who considers himself the “infinitely perfect” and sinless God.

man could dare to judge them. Nicolas I. quoted this to the Emperor Michael. Anselm adopted the story into his collection, Gratian followed, and Gregory himself found in it clear evidence that he, the Pope, the bishop of bishops, stood in unapproachable majesty over all monarchs of the earth. For, as the passage stood in Anselm and Gratian, it was the Pope whom Constantine called a god, and so it has been understood and explained ever since.¹⁶

At all stages of its transmission, the claim that Constantine acknowledged the pope as a “god” was grounded in the biblical verse: “you are gods” (Ps. 82:6), which Jesus applied to “those to whom the word of God came” (a group identified with the bishops in Constantine’s purported view):

The Jews answered, ‘It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.’ Jesus answered, ‘Is it not written in your law, “I said, you are gods”? . . . those to whom the word of God came were called “gods”—and the scripture cannot be annulled. . . . (Jn. 10:34-5)

It is ironic that many Adventist evangelists who cite the papal claim proceed to quote Jn. 10:34 as proof his claim constitutes blasphemy. In fact, Constantine purportedly applied the title on the basis of the very exception Jesus Himself raises in Jn. 10:35. Thus, its use did not challenge the uniqueness of the one God, but arose from the use of the term “gods” to describe entities other than God in Ps. 82.¹⁷ Whether one agrees with the

16. Von Döllinger, Johann Joseph Ignaz, and Johannes Huber, *The Pope and the Council* (Boston: John Wilson and Son, 1870), 89. Of note, Ignaz von Döllinger was a notable Catholic critic of papal infallibility.

17. Other associations of the term “god” with the pope in non-magisterial quotes cited by Adventists may be rooted in the same transmission or logic. Alternatively (and more commonly), the usage flows from the fact that the pope acts as a subordinate “vicar” or representative “of God,” and speaks in the name of God and with the authority of God (virtually, as God). Again, though it is unnecessary to defend statements not propagated by the magisterium, these too are not beyond defense, balance, or sincerity when contextualized.

Additionally, several non-magisterial declarations identify the pope as “another Christ,” or “another God” (e.g., Labbe and Cossart, *History of the Councils*, vol. XIV, col. 109). In fact, Pope Pius XI described the priests in similar terms: “Thus the priest, as is said with good reason, is indeed ‘another Christ’; for, in some way, he is himself a continuation of Christ. ‘As the Father hath sent Me, I also send you,’ is spoken to the priest, and hence the priest, like Christ, continues to give ‘glory to God in the highest

interpretation or not (and Catholics are free to criticize it as well), it is clear that no usurpation of God's *unique* identity was intended.

In a second example, Leo XIII instructs Christians to submit to the Church and the Roman Pontiff "as to God Himself":

Union of minds, therefore, requires, together with a perfect accord in the one faith, complete submission and obedience of will to the Church and to the Roman Pontiff, as to God Himself.¹⁸

In the epistle of Hebrews, Christians receive an analogous command:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you. (Heb. 13:17)

Clearly, submission to Church leaders is enjoined in scripture, Still, is it wrong to submit oneself to another human being "as to God Himself?" Apparently not: Paul instructed wives "submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22 NASB). The language of Leo XIII's command finds biblical precedent and origin.

In another epistle, Leo XIII writes:

But since We¹⁹ hold upon this earth the place of God Almighty, who will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. . . . We feel drawn to follow the example of Our Redeemer and Master, Jesus Christ, who when about to return to heaven, implored of God, His Father, in earnest prayer, that His disciples and followers should be of one mind and of one heart: *I pray. . . that they all may be one, as thou Father in Me, and I in Thee: that*

and on earth peace to men of good will." (Pope Pius XI, *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii*, 12) "And since the priest is an ambassador for Christ, he should so live as to be able with truth to make his own the words of the Apostle: 'Be ye followers of me, as I also am of Christ'; he ought to live as another Christ. . . ." (38) Here, the priest is "another Christ" insofar as he continues Christ's ministry, follows Christ's lead, and is an ambassador for Christ. Analogously, the pope is "another Christ/God" insofar as he is an imitator, ambassador and follower of Christ/God. Although the usage seems aberrant at first glance, it clearly carries an orthodox sense.

18. Leo XII, *Sapientiae Christinae*, 22.

19. Traditionally, papal encyclicals were written in the capitalized plural of majesty: "We," following a common convention for royal heads of state.

*they also may be one in Us.*²⁰

Leo's claim to "hold upon this earth the place of God Almighty" recognizes the fact that he speaks and acts in the name of God in this world, exercising the authority of God. However, the subordination of the pope to the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is clearly expressed in his recognition of Christ as "Our. . . Master."²¹ Again, the pope does not intend to usurp the unique prerogatives of Christ.

Conclusion

This essay addresses only certain misconceptions about the papacy. A defense of its biblical foundations lies outside the scope of this paper. However, the process of interfaith dialogue requires the initial correction of any misconception held by either side. Hopefully, this paper adequately serves that purpose.

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20. Leo XIII, *Praeclare Gratulationes Publicae* (June 20 1894).

21. I am indebted to the following discussion for that insight:
<<http://sacrificium-laudis.blogspot.com/2008/09/our-lord-god-popenot-part-1.html>>