The Leaders of the Roman Church (95 AD-180 AD)

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INTRODUCTION

According to Roman Catholic tradition the Roman pontiff possesses apostolic primacy as successor of the apostle Peter. To prove this claim, apologists often refer to one of the earliest lists of ruling Roman Bishops, reconstructed by Irenaeus of Lyon (ca. 180 AD). During the time of Bishop Eleutherus (175-189 AD) Irenaeus visited Rome and published a list of eleven predecessors of the bishop of Rome. In the paragraph on these bishops, he starts with the first one, Linus:

> The blessed apostles, then, having founded and built up the Church, committed into the hands of Linus the office of the episcopate (*Adv. Haer.* 3:2-3).

According to Irenaeus, Linus first received the episcopal office and hence is seen as the first bishop.[1] Linus was appointed by "the blessed apostles", Paul and Peter (3:2), not *exclusively* Peter. The other bishops who are recorded on the list followed Linus and are seen as the leaders of the Roman church. Is Irenaeus' list historically accurate and did these bishops indeed regard themselves as monarchical leaders?

In order to answer these questions, the Roman church in the first and second centuries requires attention, from *1 Clement* (95 AD) until bishop Eleutherus (175-189

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[1] Till the second half of the third century, Linus mostly is referred to as the first bishop of Rome, *never* Peter (Lampe, 2003:137).

AD). Firstly, the relationship between the synagogues and the early Christian communities will be reconstructed in order to understand the organisational structure of the early Christian communities in Rome. Secondly, the position of the Roman church in regard to other churches outside Rome and the Imperial court receives attention. Furthermore, the context of the second half of the second century will be studied in order to interpret the role of the bishops during the reign of Emperor Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. After that, a few remarks are given in order to interpret the list of Irenaeus in its own context. The conclusion reflects on the question whether the list of Irenaeus indeed is a list of monarchical bishops who reigned the Roman church.

THE LEADERSHIP IN THE ROMAN CHURCH

The Synagogues and the Roman Christians

The first Christ-followers in Rome originated from the synagogues, since the synagogue was the first place where the Christian Gospel was preached (Du Toit, 1997:500). In Rome, the believers physically stayed in close connection with Judaism, seeing that they lived in the same parts of the metropolitan city, for example in Trastevere and alongside the Via Appia (Lampe, 2003:38-51). Caragounis rightly states that these believers at the same time had loosened their bonds with the synagogues. The Gospel preaching led in diverse places to commotions among the Jews. As a consequence, these new believers were forced to leave the community of the synagogue (1998:255).[2]

Paul's letter to the Romans indicates that a substantial part of the believers had a Jewish background and especially those Christ-followers possessed leadership roles within the community (du Toit, 1997:502). After the expulsion of Jews from the city of Rome in the year 49 AD, the communities changed and the gentile believers represented the majority among the believers (Lane, 1998:206). However, the Roman

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[2] The early Christ-followers defined themselves as distinct from Judaism. In the 40' of the first century, Paul portrays in 1 Thessalonians 2:14 the Jews as opposing the prophets, Jesus, the churches in Judea and himself. Paul identifies the suffering believers in Thessalonica with the churches of God in Judea. Paul does not regard the Christ movement as a new development within the Jewish tradition but as a separate group from Judaism. Paul describes later in Galatians 1:13-14 about his former life in Judaism, what he regards as the past. According to Mason, the usage of the term Judaism underlines the process of Christianising hence the term is used as an antidote (2009:150).

communities preserved their Jewish character, which is illustrated by the fact that the Christian women and men sat separately during the worship as the practice was in the Jewish synagogues.[3]

The organisational structure of the church communities was borrowed from the Hellenistic synagogues (Lane, 1998:213). Every Jewish congregation had a board of elders (*gerousia*), with one principal leader in every congregation (*gerousiarch*) (Wiefel, 1991:91). In contrast to synagogues in other cities, in Rome there was no single overarching authority (du Toit, 1997:505).

Like the practice in the synagogues, one leader ruled the Christian house church (cf. Brown, 1983:173ff.), normally speaking the owner of the house (Lane, 1998:232). In the first century, the leadership of the house congregations changed. Lane (1998:241) points out that *1 Clement* and *Hermas* in contrast to *Romans* and *Hebrews* show that at the end of the first century the leadership became more centralised and formalised. For example, at the end of the first century, the terms of bishop, presbyter and deacon became more incorporated in the setting of the church (Lane, 1998:234). Furthermore, *1 Clement* reveals that, in contrast to the synagogues in Rome, the Roman house churches had an overarching church governance (Lampe, 2003:399).

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[3] See Caragounis (1998:278) and Brown and Raymond (1983:169-171) for the influence of the Old Testament cultus in *1 Clement* and the earliest evidences of a development of a Christian variant of the Levitical structure of high priest, priests and Levites replacing the bishops, presbyters and deacons in the Christian church. This development gains momentum from Tertullian (ca. 200) onwards.

The Roman Church and its Presbyterial Governance

At least until the first half of the second century the organisation of the Roman

church was characterised by a presbyterial governance (Grundeken, 2015:7). Firstly, *1

Clement* (95 AD) assumes that the Roman church was ruled by a group of presbyters[4]:

> Blessed are those presbyters who have gone before, seeing that their
> departure was fruitful and ripe: for they have no fear lest anyone should
> remove them from their appointed place. For we see that ye have displaced
> certain persons, though they were living honourably, from the ministration
> which had been respected by them blamelessly (44:4-5).

Subsequently, around the year 110 AD, Ignatius of Antioch did not write

anything in *Romans* about the office of the bishops in Rome (Duffy, 2011:19). This is

surprising since in his other letters he urges for example the believers to do nothing

without a bishop (*Phil.* 7-8; *Magn.* 6-8). *Hermas* (100-150? AD)[5] refers to "elders that

preside over the Church" (*Vis.* 2.4:3, cf. 2.2:6, 3.9:7, *Sim.* 9.27:2). Additionally, *Hermas*

displays that the leaders quarrelled about status and honour (*Vis.* 3.9:7-10; *Sim.* 8.7:4-

6). However, this quarrelling seems to have had no immediate success, *Hermas* still

writes about a plurality of leaders (Lampe, 2003:398). On the whole, *1 Clement* and

Hermas indicate that a plurality of leaders exercised the governance of the Roman

church simultaneously.

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[4] Cf. 1:3; 21:6; 44:1; 47:6; 54:2; 57:1; 42:4ff. See Lampe (2003:399-400) for the interchangeable usage of the term bishop and presbyter in *1 Clement.*

[5] See Grundeken (2015:2-9) for the debate about the dating of *Hermas.*

Although diverse Christian house congregations were present in the city of Rome, they regarded themselves as a single entity. *1 Clement* opens his letter with the words "The Church of God which sojourns in Rome", indicating that the senders of the letter see themselves as a unified body. Moreover, *Hermas* points out that the presbyters came together on special occasions (*Vis.* 2.2:6). To sum up, the Roman Christian house congregations regarded themselves as "cells of one common Roman church" (du Toit, 1997:508).

Hermas displays that within the Roman church communities were certain appointed persons for special, overarching offices. Grapte and Clement (*Vis.* 2.4:3), whether they are deacons or presbyters (cf. Osiek, 1998:154), served the Roman communities. Grapte was occupied with the instruction of the widows and orphans whereas Clement was responsible for the communication with churches outside Rome. Remarkably, *Hermas* gives no hint that Clement is the author of *1 Clement* neither occupied the role of monarchical bishop (Duffy, 2011:20). Lampe suggests that Clement's role as an "external minister" would develop rapidly into a prominent position within the Roman church (2003:403-405).

The Apostles and the Concept of Succession

At the time of *1 Clement* the office of the bishops was seen as installed by a plurality of apostles. In 42:4 the author writes:

> So preaching everywhere in country and town, they appointed their firstfruits, when they had proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons unto them that should believe.

Brown and Raymond (1983:175) think that *1 Clement* describes an apostolic practice, but the idea that the apostles installed every bishop is rather an occasional than universal rule. To put it in other words, it is doubtful that all Roman bishops and deacons were installed by apostles. All in all, *1 Clement* sees the offices of bishop *and* deacon as linked to the practice of the apostles.

1 Clement underlines that the role of bishop is related to the idea of succession. Successors of the bishops were appointed to continue the ministry in the Roman church. In *1 Clement* 44:1-2 the author states:

> And our Apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife over the name of the bishop's office. For this cause therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the aforesaid persons, and afterwards they provided a continuance, that if these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministration. Those therefore who were appointed by them, or afterward by other men of repute with the consent of the whole Church, and have ministered unblameably to the flock of Christ in lowliness of mind, peacefully and with all modesty, and for long time have borne a good report with all these men we consider to be unjustly thrust out from their ministration.

In contrast to Caragounis, the author does *not* try "to establish an apostolic succession between the apostles and his own office" (1998:275). Instead, *1 Clement* mentions a plurality of persons set apart for the role of bishop, not a single person. It is more accurate to say that *1 Clement* tries to establish an apostolic tradition of the Roman presbytery by means of the concept of succession. Interestingly, *1 Clement*

refers to the apostles in general and not to one specific apostle like Paul or Peter. Although *1 Clement* mentions Paul and Peter, the author writes much more about Paul, suggesting that *only* Paul was seen as "the apostle of Rome" (Miege and Papini, 2006:105). To conclude, the concept of succession in *1 Clement* is related to a plurality of leaders in the Roman church, not to a single person.

The idea of succession in *1 Clement* has a purpose to give the Roman presbyterate a special, apostolic force. The letter displays that the author admonishes the leaders of the Corinthian church as superiors:[6]

> But if certain persons should be disobedient unto the words spoken by Him through us, let them understand that they will entangle themselves in no slight transgression and danger (59:1).

In this passage, *1 Clement* relates the role of the Roman presbyterate to obedience, even of communities outside Rome. Although the Roman church does not have monarchical force yet, the stepping stones are laid for a further development of the Roman position.

The Development of the Roman Position

From the end of the first century onwards, the self-confidence of the Roman church increased, which prepared a fertile soil for the development of a *single* bishop as a firm defender of the tradition of the Roman church. The self-confidence of the

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[6] Cf. *1 Clement* 63:2

church in Rome was fuelled at least in two manners: in the relation of the Roman church towards believers outside the city of Rome and the Imperial court in Rome.

The Roman Church and the Other Saints

In relationship towards other Christian communities, the church of Rome seems to be *the* example for other churches outside Rome. As seen, *1 Clement* claims obedience of other Christian communities towards Rome (59:1; 63:2). In the beginning of the second century, in his *letter to the Romans*, Ignatius of Antioch has only praise for the Roman church. The church is presented as a teacher for other churches and is not in need of instruction (Schatz, 1996:5). That the Roman church continued to have this primacy during the second century, also reflects a letter of Dionysius of Corinth, written in the year 170 AD (*Eccl. Hist.* IV, 23:10):

> From the start it has been your custom to treat all Christians with unfailing kindness, and to send contributions to many churches in every city, sometimes alleviating the distress of those in need, sometimes providing for your brothers in the mines.

Dionysius praises the Roman church, for her love as well as her service toward other Christian communities. To conclude, the Roman church had a special position among the other churches in the Roman Empire and was seen as an example to others.

The Roman Church and the Emperor

From the end of the first century onwards, the self-confidence of the Roman church in relation to the Imperial court developed. In *1 Clement,* the Roman church appears as a victorious survivor of the troubles (1:1) which they experienced during the reign of Nero and Domitian (Caragounis, 1998:275). A few years later, Ignatius urges in *Romans* (110 AD) the Christians not to prevent his martyrdom (cf. 2:1; 4:1). Salvoni correctly states that this is only possible when these Christians in Rome actually had connections with the Imperial court (1970:247).

During the reign of the Emperors Hadrian (117-138 AD) and Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD) the Roman Empire flourished immensely and the Roman church received some release. Hadrian's policy was more favourable for the Christians, since accusations against Christians required a proof of an illegal act. Antoninus Pius continued this line, although Justin Martyr had to remind him about his father's policy in his *First Apology* (68). All in all, during reign of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius the fame of the city of Rome grew and in this context the self-confidence of the Roman church increased as well.

Against this background Christian apologists interacted with the Imperial court in order to plead for toleration and to convince them of the Christian faith. To illustrate, the eastern philosophers Quadratus and Aristides both wrote an apology to Emperor Hadrian before the year 130 AD (*Ecc. Hist.* 4.3:1-2). The first apology written *in* Rome addressed to the Emperor Antoninus Pius was written by Justin Martyr (ca. 155). Pius was popular within the Roman Empire and mild towards

Christians and Jews which gave Justin Martyr the opportunity to write his discourse. At the moment that a few Christians were killed, Justin Martyr wrote his *Second Apology*. This writing was addressed to the Emperor, the senate and the Roman people with the question to publish his writings together with the Emperor's opinion (*II Apol. 14.1*). That Justin Martyr publicly asked the Emperor for a response shows his self-confidence. This might indicate that the Roman church regarded herself as one of the players in the political and social field, a group which the Emperor could not ignore or maltreat.

During the reign of Emperor Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD) two important events took place related to the organisational structure of the Roman church. Firstly, in the year 144, Marcion met *on his own initiative* the "presbyters and teachers" of the Roman church. During this Roman synod they disputed a passage in Luke 5:36ff (Lampe, 2003:399).[7] The Roman synod declared Marcion a heretic and he could no longer stay in fellowship with the Roman Christians.

Subsequently, during the Pasqual controversy (156 AD), Anicetus of Rome and Polycarp of Smyrna discussed together in Rome about the liturgical calendar. In the end, Anicetus and Polycarp could not find agreement on the date of Easter. Polycarp refused to change his conviction, because in his opinion, his tradition came from the apostle John. On his turn, Anicetus did not refer to other apostles like Paul

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[7] Marcion's canon consisted of a revised version of Luke's Gospel and ten letters of Paul. If the Roman church had to refer to an apostle as a guarantee of their tradition, it is imaginable that the church of Rome had difficulties to invoke the apostle Paul (Miegge and Papini, 2006:136).

or Peter to justify his right. On the contrary, Eusebius writes that Anicetus referred to "the customs of the presbyters that had preceded him" (*Eccl. Hist.* V.24:16).[8] It seems that during the first Pasqual controversy Anicetus acted without other presbyters. Nevertheless, in the mid-second century, a bishop could not take a personal decision without calling a regional synod together (Papini, 2009:23; cf. *Eccl. Hist.* V, 24:10).

In these years of a relatively peaceful relationship with the Imperial Court, the Roman church was confronted with internal troubles. The church in Rome had to respond to gnostic heresies and combatted sects like the Marcionites and the Valentinians. Although the Roman church was unified through the presbytery, this urgent situation caused the church to put a *single* leader forwards, to safeguard the orthodox doctrine (Green, 2010:65). This process likely happened just after the council of Rome (144 AD), seeing that twelve years later bishop Anicetus is *the* representative of the Roman church during the Pasqual controversy.

A Different Political Climate and the First Monarchical Bishops

At the moment that Marcus Aurelius became the Emperor (161 AD), the Roman church began to change more drastically. In the second half of the second century, the Christian population in Rome had seen growth and their influence came

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[8] During the second Pasqual controversy in the year 195 AD, some interpreters think that bishop Victor I of Rome claimed that the Roman tradition was legitimated by the apostles Peter *and* Paul. (cf. Klaus, 1996:11). However, this interpretation is based on an assumption. Known is that bishop Polycrates of Ephesus stated that the eastern tradition was in line with the apostles Philip and John. On his turn, Victor I excommunicated all the churches in Minor-Asia, which ultimately was prevented by bishops like Irenaeus (*Eccl. Hist.* V. 24:2-5).

to the surface (cf. Stark, 1997:6-10). During the reign of Aurelius, the Christian church experienced persecutions, both physically and verbally. For example, Justin Martyr died in Rome (ca. 166 AD) and other Christians were killed in Lyon (177 AD). Besides these local persecutions, the Christians faced an increase of literary opposition. To illustrate, the Christians were maligned in the popular document "The True Word" of Celsus (ca. 175-180). Additionally, Fronto, who was a friend of Emperor Aurelius, denounced the Christians in a discourse (*Oct.* 31).

Despite the changes in the political and religious climate of the Roman Empire, bishops stepped forward to preside over the Roman Church! Soter (ca. 166-175) is mentioned in an exhortation of Dionysius to the Romans believers (*Eccl. Hist.* IV, 23:10):

> ye Romans, keep up the custom of the Romans handed down by the fathers, which your blessed bishop Soter has not only preserved, but added to, sending a splendid gift to the saints, and exhorting with blessed words those brethren who go up to Rome, as an affectionate father to his children.

According to the author, Soter preserved the tradition and served other believers who were not part of the Roman church. Lampe remarks that Soter was one of the presbyters, appointed as the "external minister" (2003:403-404). Indeed, Soter was occupied with the care of the saints outside Rome. Nevertheless, he was at the same

time a preserver of the Roman customs, what might suggest that he was, or tried to

become, *the* bishop of Rome.[9]

Irenaeus portrays Soter's successor Eleutherus (ca. 175-189 AD) as a fervent

protector of the apostolic tradition (*Haer.* 3, 3:3). That Eleutherus exercised self-

confidence is evident from what happened on a Roman synod in the year 177 AD.

The Roman synod condemned the teachings of the Montanist and Eleutherus

excommunicated them (Groh, 1998:779).[10] Overall, Eleutherus' act of

excommunication indicates clearly that he was the *primus* among *pares*. He was the

last one before Victor I (ca. 189-199) reigned as monarchical bishop over the Roman

church (Lampe, 2003:403).

Irenaeus' List in Perspective

During Irenaeus' visit of the city of Rome (180 AD) he reconstructed a list of the

Roman bishops. The list which Irenaeus published in his work *Against Heresies* (ca.

200 AD) ends with bishop Eleutherus, who died in 189 AD. In *Against Heresies,*

Irenaeus attacks Christian sects whose doctrines he regarded as heretical. One of his

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[9] In Dionysius' letter mentions for the first time in church history that Paul *and* Peter founded the church in Corinth *and* Rome (*Eccl. Hist.* II, 25:8). Unfortunately, Dionysius' letter contains some errors: firstly, Peter has not laid the fundaments for the church in Corinth, the church was thoroughly Pauline. Next, in the time Paul arrived in Rome, a community of believers already lived in the capital for many years (Rom. 15:23). Finally, it is debated if Peter even lived, worked and died in Rome.

[10] The excommunication of the Montanist also happened at regional synods in the east of the Roman Empire (*Eccl. Hist.* V, 16:10).

main arguments is that the orthodox faith is passed down from Jesus' disciples to the

bishops:

> It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see
> the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested
> throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who
> were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate]
> the succession of these men to our own times; those who neither taught nor
> knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about (III, 3:1)

In this passage, Irenaeus proposes the concept of apostolic succession connected with

a *plurality* of bishops as a safeguard of the right doctrines. This sheds light on the list

of the twelve bishops: Irenaeus defines that the tradition of the apostles is linked

with the anti-gnostic and anti-Marcionite doctrinal position of the orthodox faith and

that the safeguards are the bishops who stand in the apostolic succession.[11]

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[11] The debate as to whether Irenaeus only refers to the church of Rome as the safeguard of the
apostolic tradition or the church in general (*Adv. Her.* III, 3:2) will not be discussed in this paper
because of its limited scope.

CONCLUSION

The early Christ-followers in Rome originated from the synagogues. Although the Roman church soon became predominantly gentile, the church remained heavily influenced by the Old Testament. Initially, the organisational model of the synagogues was the blueprint of the Roman house churches. Although the house churches were scattered around the city of Rome, the believers regarded themselves as a single unit. In contrast to the synagogues in Rome, the Christian congregations had an overarching level of ruling presbyters. Early Christian writings like *1 Clement* (95 AD), *Romans* (110 AD) and *Hermas* (100-150? AD) support the idea that presbyters ruled the Roman church. Although *1 Clement* refers to the concept of succession for the first time, the succession is related to the presbytery as a whole and not to a single bishop.

The increasing self-confidence of the Roman church in the context of a flourishing Roman Empire and moderate Emperors like Hadrian and Pius, prepared a fertile soil for the opportunity to centralise the church administration and governance. The church of Rome increased her self-confidence in relation towards other churches as well as the Imperial court. To illustrate, the Roman church was praised as an example in the faith and seen as a teacher of other Christian communities. Besides that, the development of self-confidence is traceable regarding the interactions with the Imperial court. During these years, the Roman church had

grown in self-confidence and was prepared to resist the dissenters who invaded the church from the mid-second century onwards.

Diverse heretical sects urged the Roman church to defend her position. For example, in the year 144 AD Marcion called *on his own initiative* the presbytery of the church together. This act of confidence needed a firm rebuttal. The presbytery indeed acted with self-confidence: Marcion was denounced as a heretic. After the condemnation of the Marcionites, the church of Rome had to preserve the orthodox faith in front of the Valentinians and the Montanists as well. Between the Roman council in 144 AD and the Pasqual controversy, the quest for a self-confident church to confront heresies resulted in bishop Anicetus as the first *main* Roman player on the stage. This line which Anicetus initiated continued during the period of bishop Soter (ca. 166-175 AD) and Eleutherus (175-189 AD) and ultimately resulted in the reign of Victor I as a monarchical bishop.

Just before the reign of Victor I, Irenaeus reconstructed a list of bishops who presided over the Roman church. The list indeed contains names of those who served the church in Rome, although most of them would not regard themselves as a *single* leader.

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