

PONTIFICAL YEARBOOK 2024

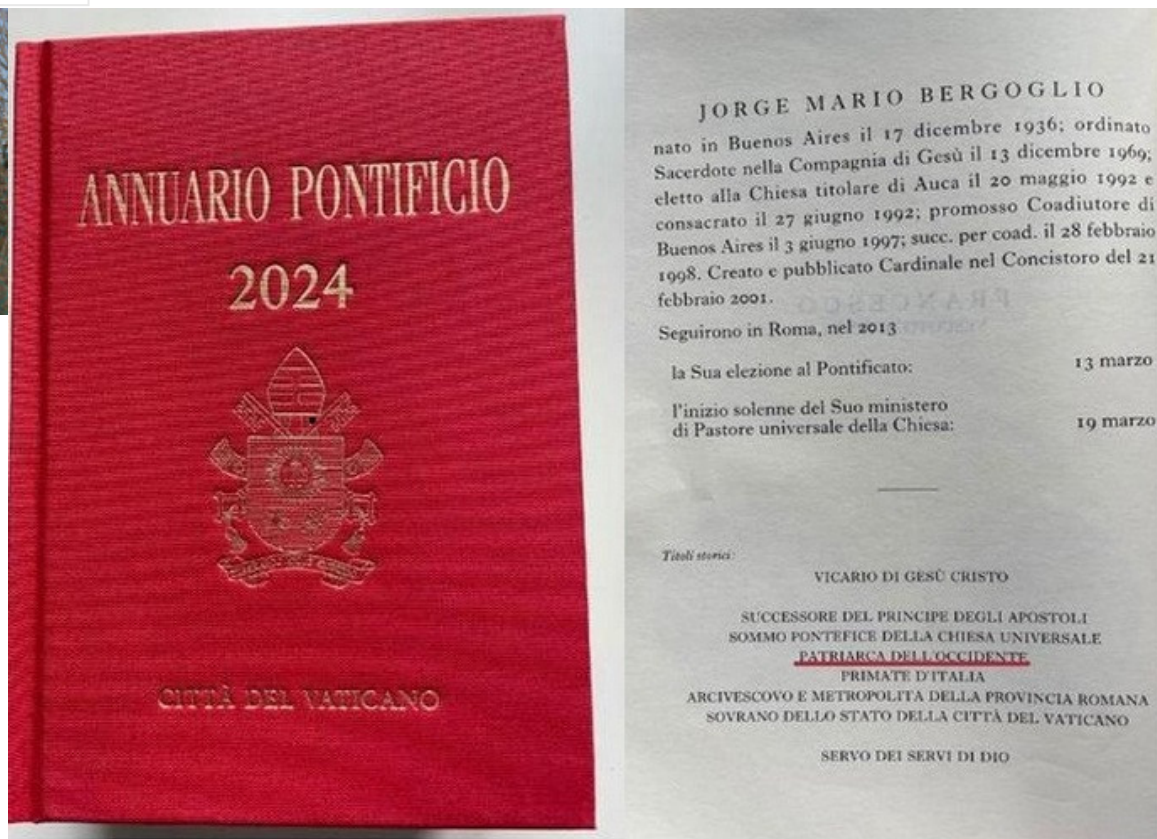
## Pope's titles, the great misunderstanding about the primacy of Peter

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On 9 April, the Pontifical Yearbook 2024 was published. Among the titles attributed to the pope, the reinsertion of 'Patriarch of the West', which had been removed by Benedict XV, immediately stood out. What does this decision mean? Is it just a trifle or is

there more at stake?

**It was 1 March 2006 when Luigi Accattoli announced** in *Corriere della Sera* (most read daily newspaper in Italy), in a preview, that the title 'Patriarch of the West' would no longer appear in the list of titles attributed to the pope in the Pontifical Yearbook. Thus, on the dedicated page, the following wording would be found:

VICAR OF JESUS CHRIST

SUCCESSOR OF THE PRINCE OF THE APOSTLES

SUPREME PONTIFF OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

PRIMATE OF ITALY

METROPOLITAN ARCHBISHOP OF THE ROMAN PROVINCE

SOVEREIGN OF THE VATICAN CITY

SERVANT OF THE SERVANTS OF GOD

The title was followed by the pope's proper name - in this case, Joseph Ratzinger -, the essential ecclesiastical biography, the day of election and the day of the solemn beginning of the pontificate. The order of the titles attributed to the pontiff is not random. The first, in large and detached from the others, constitutes the pope in his essence: as the successor of the Apostle Peter on the Chair of Rome, the pope is per se the Vicar of Jesus Christ, as explicitly recognised by *Lumen Gentium* 18, 22, as well as by the explanatory *Nota Previa*, 3.

**Not even a week had passed when on 6 March, Hilarion Alfeyev**, a leading representative of the Russian Orthodox Church, at the time bishop of Vienna and Austria, in an interview with Vittoria Prisciandaro for the monthly magazine *Jesus* (April 2006), heavily criticised Pope Benedict's choice, believing it to be an expression of a desire to further affirm his claimed universal jurisdiction, since the other titles that were inadmissible to the Orthodox remained.

**On 22 March, the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity explained** in a communiqué the history of the title of Patriarch of the West and considered it an obsolete title with no ecclesial relevance. On 8 June, a Communiqué of the Ecumenical Patriarchate responded by reiterating that that title was the only one "accepted by the

Orthodox conscience", while that of Vicar of Christ and Supreme Pontiff of the universal Church "cause serious difficulties for the Orthodox, since they are perceived as implying a universal jurisdiction of the bishop of Rome over the entire Church, something the Orthodox have never accepted".

**Let us keep these reactions in mind and proceed.** In the Pontifical Yearbook of 2020, under Pope Francis' reign, there was an important graphic change. On the page where only the pope's name was listed, the name of Francis was now accompanied, in the line below, by the title Bishop of Rome. On the next page, on the other hand, there was the usual short biography, followed, however, by the other titles, introduced by the words 'Historical titles'. In practice, the title of Vicar of Christ was relegated to the bottom of the page, as a historical title.

**Cardinal Gerhard Müller reacted in *Die Tagespost*,** calling the operation a "theological barbarity", while the Director of the Vatican Press Office ran for cover, explaining that "the definition of 'historical' in relation to the titles attributed to the pope in one of the pages dedicated to him in the Pontifical Yearbook of 2020 seems to me to indicate the link with the history of the papacy". Seems to me...

**The latest novelty, as mentioned, occurred in this year's Yearbook:** among the "historical titles", immediately after that of Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, the title of Patriarch of the West also reappeared. There was no explanation either from the Press Office or from the competent Pontifical Council. On the other hand, the analyst of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, Nikos Tzoitis, intervened in the news agency Fides to comment on the return of that title: "Pope Francis' choice to restore the title of Patriarch of the West can be linked to his insistence on the importance of synodality, and to the ecumenical solicitude that always urges one to look back to the first centuries of Christianity, when there were no dogmatic lacerations between the Churches". The first millennium, according to Tzoitis, was the millennium of the "Pentarchy", when the five patriarchal sees - Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem - "were recognised also by the imperial powers as having shared responsibility for the orthodoxy of the faith and the government of the universal Church".

**That this key can correctly interpret Francis's choice** - and that of those who evidently advised him - appears probable from the reconstruction we have made in this article: the pope has reintroduced the title beloved by the Orthodox, as well as an (apparent) synodal exercise of the primacy, while downgrading the indigestible ones.

**There is, however, a misunderstanding.** When the pope was historically given the title of Patriarch of the West, it was not understood in the way the Orthodox see it, i.e. as a 'brother' patriarchate of the other four, with a mere primacy of honour. The Orthodox project onto this title their ecclesiological vision, which explicitly excludes the primacy of the successor of the Apostle Peter, understood as direct and universal jurisdiction over the whole Church. In reality, even in the 'mythical' first millennium (which in truth experienced an industrial amount of schisms and divisions), the pope did not act as Patriarch of the West, but as universal Pastor, intervening directly not only in the territories of the West, but, when necessary, also in the Eastern ones. In essence, the Catholic Church has always understood that historical title within the doctrine of primacy, whereas the Orthodox evaluate it according to the framework of their own Eucharistic ecclesiology and collegial principle, of which the Pentarchy is an expression.

**It is precisely for this reason that Benedict XVI** had deemed the attribute obsolete and meaningless, because what we conveniently call the Latin Church is not, like the Eastern Patriarchates, a Church sui iuris, which therefore requires a patriarch (that would be the pope), an exarch or a metropolitan; instead, it knows a different territorial organisation, which is that of the (recent) episcopal conferences.

**In light of these considerations, the least that can be said** is that the pope has done exactly the opposite of what logic would imply: he has in fact downgraded the title of Vicar of Christ, which expresses the essence of the papacy in the Catholic view, while reintroducing an obsolete historical title. In doing so, he has further marked the break with his immediate predecessor, while at the same time trying to mend the rift with that Orthodox Church, especially the Russian one, which he had just annoyed with the publication of *Fiducia supplicans* (by the way, it was precisely Afeyev himself who complained about the Declaration and declared dialogue with the Catholic Church over).

**A true ecumenism must instead focus on the fact that primacy,** correctly and fully understood, is the constitutive and indispensable element of communion. This pontificate therefore appears to be marked by a double misunderstanding of the primacy: on the one hand, so great as to be considered absolute, as if the pope could interfere with divine Revelation at will; on the other hand, so small as to be sacrificed on the table of ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox, who demanded the beheading of the Vicar of Christ and the return of the Patriarch of the West. And they have been gratified.