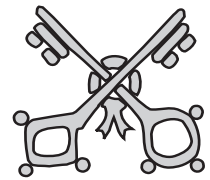


# Electing Peter's Successor

## An Overview of a Papal Election



One apostle stood out among his peers when he firmly declared that Jesus was "the Messiah, the son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Jesus responded:

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Matthew 16:17-19

### THUS, PETER BECAME THE FIRST POPE.



*A careful reading of the Acts of the Apostles shows many ways in which Peter exercised his papal authority in the years following Christ's life on earth.*

- Peter arranged the selection of Judas' replacement among the Twelve Apostles (1:15-26).
- He addressed the crowd in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost (2:14-40).
- He worked the first recorded miracle in Jesus' name (3:1-10).
- He boldly spoke to the Sanhedrin after his and John's arrest (4:5-12).
- He pronounced anathema (divine punishment) on Church members Ananias and Sapphira, and they fell dead at his feet (5:1-11).
- He opened the way for Gentiles to become Christians after baptizing a Roman centurion (10:9-48).

Peter spent his last years in Rome, and died a martyr's death during the rule of Emperor Nero. It is difficult to establish the exact date and year of his death, but many scholars say it was during the year 64 or 65.

Because Roman leaders persecuted Christians off and on throughout the first three centuries of the Church's existence, we know that many of the other early popes also died martyrs' deaths.

So, we know how they died, but how did they become pope?

*cont'd on page 2*

## Early Popes and The Election Process

In the early days of the Church, whenever a pope died, all the Christians of Rome, clergy and laity alike, got together with a few bishops from neighboring cities to elect a new pope. That was how Peter's immediate successor, Pope Saint Linus, was chosen. He was a priest of Tuscany who ruled as pope from 64 or 65 to sometime between 76 and 79. Little is known about his papacy, other than that it, too, ended in martyrdom.

Much more is known about Pope Saint Clement I, the fourth pope, who reigned from 88 to sometime between 97 and 101. He had been ordained by Peter, according to tradition, and John was still alive during his papacy. A Jew who had grown up in Rome, Pope Saint Clement probably was a freed slave or the son of a freed slave.

Clement left behind one recorded document. This letter, written in Greek to the Church in Corinth, proved instrumental in settling a schism brewing in that city.

A close reading of Clement's letter shows his firm grounding in the thought and language of the Old Testament, plus his familiarity with Paul's epistles to the Corinthians, Romans, Titus, and Hebrews. Also noteworthy are a few sayings of Jesus that he quotes, none of which is recorded—at least not in the same language—in any of the recognized Gospels.

---

**Urging the Corinthians to set aside differences largely based on interpersonal jealousies, Pope Saint Clement wrote, "Let us fix our gaze on the blood of Christ, realizing how precious it is to his Father, since it was shed for our salvation and brought the grace of repentance to all the world."**

---

## Changes Through the Years

The Church's method for selecting new popes gradually changed after Constantine the Great ended Rome's persecution of Christians early in the fourth century. Unfortunately, during the final years of the old Roman Empire and extending well into the years of the new Roman Empire, the state took an increasingly prominent role in the election of new popes.

At first, civil leaders began demanding that no new pope be named without their final approval. Later, they went a step further and pressured for the election of their personal favorites. By the sixth century, two popes—Felix IV (526-530) and Boniface II (530-532)—recognized that civil interference in papal elections had gotten out of hand.

They tried to stem this tide by naming their successors to the papacy, but the clergy and laity of Rome, who maintained it was their right to choose a new pope, refused to acknowledge any papal appointments.

It was not until Pope Nicholas II issued his Papal Election Decree in 1059 that Rome's lay people, finally and forever, were excluded from the papal election process. Nicholas decreed that henceforth only cardinals of Rome—at that time considered the higher clergy—could elect popes. Later, at the Lateran Council in 1179, Pope Alexander III stipulated that: (1) all cardinals are equal in status to one another regardless of where they live, and (2) two-thirds of them must agree on a candidate before one can be named pope.

Through the centuries other refinements to the election process were added by other popes—Gregory X in 1274; Pius IV in 1564; Leo XIII in 1882; Pius X in 1904; Paul VI in 1975; and John Paul II in 1996. Obviously, from the beginning of Church history, the rules have been man-made, and these rules have changed as times have changed.

One article of faith regarding the papacy, however, has always stayed the same: each duly elected pope is in fact a successor of Simon Peter, the first pope. Whether a pope is personally holy or scandalously sinful, whether he is a brilliant administrator who strengthens the Church or a miserable failure who weakens it, during his reign as pope, he remains the only person on earth who truly walks "in the shoes of the fisherman."

### Today's Process

There are numerous rules regulating the election process, but in general, here is how a new pope is selected today.

Upon the pope's death or resignation, Church law requires that all cardinals worldwide under the age of 80 assemble in Rome for a conclave, or meeting, to elect a new pope.



The cardinals must assemble in Rome 15-20 days after the end of the previous pope's reign. Each must swear an oath of secrecy whose violation will result in his immediate excommunication. Each must promise to abide by all rules of the official election process.

On the afternoon of the first day, the first ballot is held. A two-thirds majority is needed to elect a pope. If no one is elected on the first ballot, the balloting continues on the next day with two ballots in the morning and two in the afternoon. (After any of the ballots are taken, if someone has a two-thirds majority, the voting ends.)

If, after three days, no one is elected, the cardinals take a daylong break for prayer and discussion before resuming the voting process.

A break is again taken after another three days of voting. If someone is not elected after the next three days, a third break is taken. After three more days of balloting, if no one is elected, then any candidate with a simple majority of votes (one-half plus one) is considered elected.

After the voting ends in the morning and again after the afternoon votes end, the ballots and all notes taken by all the electors are burned. If no one has received a two-thirds majority, straw is added to the paper to create black smoke. This signals to the world that no pope has yet been elected. If the smoke is white, we have a new pope.

During the entire period of the conclave, the cardinals are permitted no contact with the outside world. They read no newspapers, watch no television, listen to no radio, and are not permitted to send or receive any message by any means whatsoever, whether through

the latest electronic gadgets or through old-fashioned passed notes.

Upon the election of a new pope, the candidate is given time to consider whether he will accept or reject the papal office. If he accepts, he then discloses by what name he wishes to be known. Often a candidate chooses the name of a previous pope or a saint whom he admires, but there is no rule that regulates his choice.

After he announces his new name, the cardinals conduct a ceremony in which they pledge their obedience to the new successor to Saint Peter. Finally, the new pope is dressed for the first time in papal garments and led to the main balcony of the Vatican.

The Dean of the College of Cardinals declares to the thousands keeping vigil in St. Peter's Square and to a waiting world, "*Habemus Papam!*" "We have a pope!"