

Early Church Administration & Papal Elections: When Popes Were Just Bishops

By [Austin Cline](#), in the About.com Guide

Many people imagine that the current structure and administration of the Catholic Church today is very much like it has always been, but that's not the case. Early on, there isn't even evidence of a single bishop of Rome presiding over churches in the city. Although the official lists give the names of several "popes" during the first decades, it is more likely that they simply presided over a council of elders. The first pope who actually a single bishop presiding over the diocese of Rome was Pius I (142 - 155).

In addition to the fact that there isn't really any evidence for the existence of a church administration under the leadership of Peter, there isn't even any evidence for such an administration under many of his successors. All available evidence points to the existence not of a monoepiscopal structure but instead to committees of elders (*presbyteroi*) or overseers (*episkopoi*). This was standard in Christian communities all over the Roman empire. Not until a couple of decades into the first century do letters from Ignatius of Antioch describe churches led by a single bishop who was merely assisted by the presbyters and deacons.

Even once a single bishop can definitively be identified in Rome, his powers were not at all like what we see in the pope today. The bishop of Rome did not call himself the "Vicar of Christ" (the first to do so was Gelasius I, 492 - 496). The bishop of Rome did not have the Roman Curia to govern other churches. He did not call for church councils or write encyclicals. Pope Sylvester I (314 - 335) didn't even attend the first ecumenical Council of Nicea, much less call it (that was done by Constantine the Great).

The bishop of Rome did not have the power or authority to require things like clerical celibacy — in fact, it is likely that several of the earliest popes were married, just as Peter was. Four, if not more, early popes were themselves sons of priests (Sixtus I, Damasus I, Boniface I, Innocent I) and this wouldn't have been possible if their parents weren't validly married.

When bishops of Rome did attempt to exercise power over other churches, it wasn't uncommon for them to be rebuked for it. Celestine I entered into communion with a presbyter excommunicated by African bishops and was sharply chastised for it. Victor I ordered other churches to celebrate Easter on a Sunday rather than on the Jewish 14th day of Nisan (Passover) and he was chastised for that. Popes rendering judgment on theological matters were sometimes ignored and sometimes rebuked for being wrong.

The bishop of Alexandria exercised greater power over the churches of Egypt than the bishop of Rome did over the churches in Italy. The bishop of Rome did not appoint bishops in other diocese — the administration of local churches was left in local hands

and, like in Rome itself, bishops were elected by the people. This sort of election is perhaps the most surprising to people today, long used to bishops being appointed from above.

During the first millennium of Christianity, the norm was for bishops in any diocese to be elected by both the people and the priests — the bishop of Rome was no exception. At this time, the election of a bishop tended to occur in three distinct stages. First was the *testimonium*, at which the candidates' qualifications were attested to. Second was the *suffragium*, during which the community voted for one candidate over others. Third was the *judicium*, where the community ratified the results.

By the fifth century, as a mark of Rome's growing importance for the general Christian community, other bishops in the area started taking a role in the election of Rome's bishop. The clergy and people continued to elect their bishop, though, and that was considered the most important principle.

Celestine I wrote "Let no bishop be given to a community against its will; the consent and desire of the clergy, people, and nobility is required." Leo the Great wrote "No consideration allows making bishops of those who have not been chosen by the clerics, sought for by the people, and consecrated by the provincial bishops with the consent of the metropolitan." Can you imagine anything like this happening today in the Catholic Church?

Over time, both bishops and nobility in the area around Rome acquired a greater influence over the election of Rome's bishop. Eventually the will of the people was consulted on only a perfunctory basis — and sometimes not at all. It even came to pass that popes had to be ratified by the emperor, not by the people of Rome they would be serving.

Pope Stephen IV (769) decided at a synod that only the clergy could vote in elections, with the role of the people reduced to affirmation. Sometimes they could make their feelings known with enough strength to overturn the decisions of their leaders. The riots following the imprisonment of Benedict I led to his reinstatement, but this was a generally rare occurrence.