

A
HISTORY
OF THE
POPES

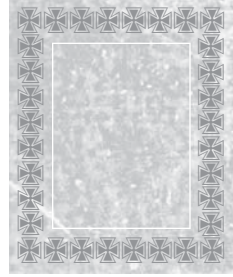


*From Peter
to the Present*



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A SHEED & WARD BOOK
ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK



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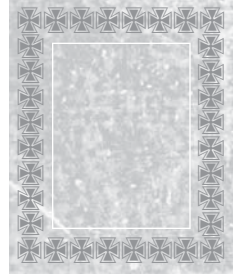
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INTRODUCTION

This book is about the oldest living institution in the Western world, an institution that began some two thousand years ago but that is as vital today as perhaps ever in its history. The papacy, which traces its origins to Saint Peter, Jesus's chief disciple, is embodied today in Pope Benedict XVI. In between Peter and Benedict there have been some 265 individuals who claimed to be Peter's successors and whose claim is today generally recognized as legitimate. Some were saints; some were sinners. Pope Leo the Great and Pope Gregory the Great were men of heroic stature, but Pope John XII, who became pope at the age of eighteen, led such a debauched life that he was a scandal even in the debauched Roman society of the tenth century. There were, besides, many other individuals who claimed to be pope, but whose claims contemporaries or posterity rejected as invalid, the "anti-popes." They figure heavily in some parts of our story.

The popes differed among themselves in social class. Pope Callistus I was a former slave, and Pope Pius IX a noble. Pope Pius XII was from the Roman aristocracy, but his successor, Pope John XXIII, came from peasant stock. Popes have been Greek, Syrian, African, Spanish, French, German, Dutch, and of course Italian. There has been only one English pope, Hadrian IV, and only one Polish, John Paul

II. None has been Portuguese, Irish, Scandinavian, Slovak, Slovenian, Bohemian, Hungarian—or American. A fair number were not priests when they were elected. Pope Leo X, for instance, was a deacon, and Benedict VIII, Benedict IX, as well as others, were laymen. Popes were not always elected in Rome. As late as 1800 Pope Pius VII was elected in Venice.

If you are at all interested in either religion or history, you have to be interested in the papacy. Within our own lifetimes, popes have been front-page news. Pope John Paul II is sometimes spoken of as the Man of the Century. The popes were players in virtually all the great dramas of the Western world in the last two thousand years, and in those dramas they were often major protagonists. The history of the popes is not a history told in a sacristy.

In this book I tell the popes' story as a historian, not as a theologian, but by the very nature of the subject theology must at times enter it. Indeed, the whole edifice of the papacy is built upon a theological interpretation of what we may take as historical fact: Peter's preeminence among "the Twelve," Jesus's closest disciples, and his subsequent ministry and death in Rome. Peter was thus the first bishop of Rome and therefore the first pope. All the popes since then claim to be his successors and to have inherited his leadership role. I tell their story neither to justify nor challenge that theological claim, and I tell it neither to defend nor to condemn the popes and their actions. I tell it to make clear what happened and how the institution got to be the way it is.

We need to keep the story in perspective. The history of the popes is not a history of Catholicism, which is a much, much bigger reality. The popes are only a part of that history. We might easily confuse the two because, especially for the past hundred years, the papacy has played a larger role in Catholics' self-definition than ever before. This new preeminence is due to many factors, but among them the modern means of communication like radio, television, and now the Internet are especially important. In the year 1200, for instance, perhaps 2 percent of the population knew there was such an institution as the papacy or believed it had anything significant to do with their religion. How would they have known about it? The papacy was not mentioned in any creed, and it did not appear in any catechism until the sixteenth

century. With Protestant rejection of it at that time came Catholic preoccupation with it, and both positions got relatively widely broadcast by the new invention of the printing press. Soon thereafter to be Catholic was to define oneself as a papist.

The history of the popes is not always pretty. The popes were human beings. Even the saints among them had their dark sides. While a few were reprehensible from almost every viewpoint, most of them strove to lead a good life according to their lights. But their weaknesses showed up glaringly because of the responsibilities they bore.

The popes as bishops of Rome faced a particular temptation almost from the earliest days. Devout Christians in and around the city made donations in land or goods to “Saint Peter,” that is, to the Church of Rome. The bishops of Rome, though they would face hard times, tended to be wealthy, and this fact made the office attractive to the wrong people, who sometimes succeeded in obtaining the office. Moreover, the real estate held by Saint Peter eventually expanded into the Papal States. Of that vast territory that stretched almost from Naples north and east across the peninsula to Venice, the pope was monarch. As ruler of a state he was easily distracted from his religious duties and drawn into political schemes. That was a situation that prevailed from the eighth century until 1860–1870, when the Papal States were confiscated by Italian forces and incorporated into the new kingdom of Italy.

For most of the periods covered by this book, therefore, the popes had a notably different job description than popes of more recent times. Today popes appoint bishops. They did not always do that. They write encyclicals. That is a development of the past hundred and fifty years. The popes speak to huge crowds and travel the globe. That was not possible until the era of trains, planes, and automobiles.

Popes of earlier eras conceived their job differently. Among the major tasks they set themselves was to guard and protect the tombs of saints Peter and Paul against profanation; to make sure the great basilicas and other churches of Rome had dignified services; to provide for orphans, widows, and other needy persons in the city; to intervene to settle doctrinal disputes among bishops; to protect Rome and the surrounding territories from foreign enemies, which meant maintaining an

army and navy; to rally Christian monarchs to lead crusades; to govern the city of Rome, to tend to its provisioning, and to enhance it with churches, fountains, and public buildings of various kinds; and to rule the Papal States—to be a monarch and the maker of monarchs.

The complications that arose from such tasks can make this book seem as if the papacy did nothing but careen from one crisis to another. Readers must remind themselves, therefore, that the book skips over relatively long periods of “business as usual.” Even those periods are interesting, and I pass them over with regret because business as usual was rarely perfectly usual. My hope is that the drastically pared down story I tell will be enough to whet the appetite to pursue the subject further and especially to delve into those eras slighted in this telling.

Four defining moments of papal history can serve as milestones in what sometimes seems like a zigzag course. The first is around the year 64, which is when Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome during the persecution by Nero. As mentioned, all the subsequent claims of the papacy to its preeminent place in the Christian church are based on the ministry and martyrdom of Peter in Rome. The second defining moment is the reign of the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century. He did more than tolerate Christianity and, as the expression goes, let it emerge from the catacombs. He favored it. He encouraged its bishops to assume public and civic responsibilities, so that the church got woven into the fabric of the sociopolitical order of society. The third is in the eighth and ninth centuries when the Papal States began to form as a more or less definable unit and the popes emerged as its temporal ruler. The fourth is 1860–1870 when the States came to an end and Rome became the capital of Italy. With the Lateran agreements in 1929 between the Holy See and the Italian government, the papacy surrendered all claims to the States and to Rome, and the Italians recognized Vatican City as an independent, sovereign state.

In a history of the popes a few terms and titles come up frequently. “The emperor” is the Roman emperor Constantine and those who claimed to be his descendants, whether in Europe or in Constantinople, present-day Istanbul. The emperor was at the peak of the secular hierarchy and was different from a king. In the West in the Middle Ages and early modern period, he might also be a king in his own right,

but as emperor he was at least theoretically the king of kings. The point to keep in mind is that especially for the early part of our story the popes dealt on the highest level with the emperor and sometimes with two emperors at once, one in the East and one in the West.

Even today the words Rome and the Vatican are sometimes used interchangeably. That is because until 1870 the popes, although they had several palaces in the city of Rome, lived most often in the so-called Apostolic Palace in the Vatican area of the city. Since 1870 that Vatican palace has been the popes' exclusive residence. From the earliest days the popes, although their cathedral was the basilica of Saint John Lateran, especially identified with the Vatican area because that is where Saint Peter was believed to have been buried after his martyrdom and over whose shrine Constantine built the magnificent basilica.

Among the cities of the ancient Roman world, Rome was unique in that it was the site of the preaching and death of *two* apostles—Peter and Paul. Rome's "double apostolicity" allowed it to refer to itself as apostolic not only because of Peter's leadership role among the disciples of Jesus but because the great Paul also came to Rome and died there. The bishopric of Rome became *the* "Apostolic See." See is the English equivalent of the Latin *sedes*, meaning chair but by extension meaning residence or dwelling place. Thus see is where bishops are located. Bishops, moreover, preached seated in a chair—a *sedes* or a *cathedra* (hence, cathedral). Among the sees, the Apostolic See was obviously the most prestigious.

Popes have borne a number of titles, the most fundamental of which is bishop of Rome. A man is pope because he is bishop of Rome, not vice versa. He occupies the Apostolic See, and therefore is pope. Today the pope is the only bishop who bears the title pope, though in the early centuries of the church the term was applied to all bishops. Pope is the English-language form of the Latin *papa*, which means simply father. Beginning in the fifth century in the West, about the time of Pope Leo the Great, the title pope became increasingly reserved to the bishop of Rome.

As suggested above, though popes gloried in the double apostolicity of their city, they identified themselves not with Paul but with Peter. Some popes seemed incapable of distinguishing themselves from

him, as if Peter and they were one mystical person. More commonly, however, they saw themselves as his agent in the world and referred to themselves as “the vicar of Peter,” *vicarius Petri*. That title appears prominently in Leo the Great and was taken up by his successors for the next eight centuries. Only rarely did popes refer to themselves as vicars of Peter and Paul, as did Pope John VIII in the ninth century.

Instead of vicar of Peter, popes today present themselves as “vicars of Christ.” Like pope, the term vicar of Christ in the early centuries was applied to all bishops because they had authority to govern the church and perform their functions in Christ’s name, but it was also applied to priests and to secular rulers. As late as the eleventh century, for instance, Emperor Henry IV loudly proclaimed himself the vicar of Christ. By the next century, partly through the agency of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, the title came to refer exclusively to the pope, and at the beginning of the thirteenth century Pope Innocent III officially adopted it to express an authority more far-reaching than that of other bishops. Subsequent popes gladly followed his example.

In the early Middle Ages popes sometimes referred to themselves as “patriarch of Rome” and later as “patriarch of the West,” which in the nineteenth century entered the official lists of papal titles. It always had a somewhat vague meaning, however, and was dropped from the list in 2006. Papal documents today designate the pope as the Supreme Pontiff, *Summus Pontifex*. Like so many other papal titles, this one too once applied to all bishops. By the year 900, however, it appears in official papal documents to refer to the pope and within a few centuries it established itself as the title most frequently used in official documents to designate him.

The polar opposite of Supreme Pontiff is “Servant of the servants of God.” The term is found as early as the fifth century, but, again, was not applied exclusively to the popes until the thirteenth century. It is the most beloved of all the papal titles, and the one that expresses Christ’s message to Peter and the others at the Last Supper when he washed their feet and told them that they should do the same for others if they wanted to be his disciples. Because Vatican Council II, 1962–1965, laid great stress on the servant-quality of all leadership in the church, Pope Paul VI added the title to the official list.



PETER: BISHOP OF ROME?

About a mile outside the ancient walls of the city of Rome is a small chapel on the Via Appia, the old Roman road. The name of the chapel is *Quo Vadis*, a Latin expression meaning Where are you going? The legend attached to the chapel was first recorded in the apocryphal Acts of Peter in the late second century. According to the legend Peter, fearing for his life in the year 64 during the persecution of Nero, fled Rome. As he raced down the Via Appia he met a man walking toward the city whom he recognized as the Lord. “Where are you going,” Peter asked him. “To Rome, to be crucified again.” With that Peter realized that his duty was to return to Rome and stay with his flock during this difficult time, which probably meant dying as a consequence. The legend has no foundation in fact, but it raises the crucial question: did Peter really come to Rome and suffer martyrdom there? I repeat: the whole subsequent history of the papacy depends on an affirmative answer to the question (see fig. 1.1).

The story of Peter and the papacy begins, however, not with Rome but with the New Testament. For Christians the New Testament is an inspired book, written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the fundamental and authentic testimony about the life and message of

Jesus. It is the touchstone of faith for the Christian church, to which the church must always have recourse and from which it can never deviate in its basic beliefs. For historians and biblical scholars, in contrast, the New Testament is a collection of documents written within a century of Jesus's death by different authors with different concerns and viewpoints. It consists of four historical narratives (the gospels), a narrative of the spread of Christian teaching in the first generation (the Acts of the Apostles), and a number of epistles, especially those by Paul, and an apocalyptic vision (the book of Revelation).

For our purposes two things are remarkable about that collection, even aside from its purportedly inspired character. The first is the sheer quantity of information those documents provide about Peter.

He is, next to Jesus himself and possibly Paul, the most fully documented of any New Testament character. Second, the sources are consistent in the picture they paint of him. What do we know? Named Simon Bar Jona, he was a fisherman like his brother Andrew. He had earlier been a disciple of John the Baptist. He lived in Capernaum on the shores of the Lake of Galilee with his wife and his mother-in-law. He was warm, loyal, impetuous, and a wonderful friend. At the Garden of Gethsemane he drew his sword in defense of Jesus and cut off the ear of a servant of the high priest.

He had a dark side. He was not as steadfast and brave as he imagined himself to be. At the Last Supper (Luke 22), Jesus said to him, "Simon, Simon, behold Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren." To which Peter said, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." Then Jesus, "I tell you Peter, rock, the cock will not crow this day until you three times deny you know me." It turned out, as we well know, just as Jesus predicted. But we also know from the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles that after Jesus's resurrection Peter became a fearless and steadfast preacher of the Good News.

Just as clear in the New Testament as his character is the preeminence Peter enjoyed among Jesus's inner circle, "the Twelve," and then later in the early church. According to Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, which is the earliest document in the New Testament to mention Peter,

Paul went to him after his conversion on the road to Damascus to learn about the faith. Peter gave Paul a crash course in fifteen days. In chapter 2, however, Paul confronts and rebukes Peter when Peter tries to back down from his previous table fellowship with Gentiles. What is important here, however, is not that Paul withstood Peter to his face, but that Paul could vindicate his own authority by a backhanded recognition of Peter's—that even *Peter* backed down.

In the first twelve chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, Peter is the dominant figure. Leader of the church in Jerusalem, he presided at the election of the successor to Judas the traitor. He spoke for the church on Pentecost and worked miracles in Jesus's name. He was an apostle to the Jews but also to the Gentiles, as is clear from the story of his conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius. Rescued from prison by an angel, he was without question the center and focus of the narrative of these chapters.

In three of the gospels Peter is the first of the Twelve to be called by Jesus. In the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—he is the first mentioned in every list of the Twelve, and he acted as their leader and spokesperson. Jesus chose him, along with Andrew and John, to witness his Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, and he took the same three to watch with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. In Mark's gospel after the resurrection the angels told the women to go tell “the disciples and Peter” about what they have seen. In John's gospel Peter is the first to enter the tomb.

Two passages, however, are particularly crucial. The first is from Matthew, chapter 16:

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered, “Blessed are you Simon, Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.

The meaning of the passage has been much disputed, especially since the Reformation. Some biblical experts argue, for instance, that the church is built not on Peter but on the confession of faith that Peter made, or even on Peter's faith itself. In other words, built on the belief in Jesus's special person and mission, which Peter happened to articulate. The consistent papal interpretation is that the church is built on Peter himself—and then on his successors through the ages. The passage is, in any case, extraordinary—no other disciple is singled out from the others in such a striking way in any of the four gospels.

The second passage is from the last chapter of John's gospel and is set on the shore of the Lake of Galilee after Jesus's resurrection:

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord: you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him a third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

These two passages dramatize what all the other passages in the New Testament about Peter point to: his leadership role and his special relationship with Jesus. That much is clear. Two sets of questions crucial to the papacy, however, remain to be answered. First, was the leadership Peter exercised unique to him, so that it was not to be passed on to others in the church? Was it so identical with the person of Peter and with the situation of the first generation that it ended with him? Or, did Peter signify a pattern that was to persist after his death? Did Peter launch a trajectory that was to continue in the church until the end of time? The simple answer is that it is difficult to understand why the authors of the New Testament would have paid so much attention to Peter if his role in the church had no significance beyond his lifetime.

The second question: what happened to Peter? Despite his prominent role in the Acts of the Apostles up to chapter 12, he disappears from the narrative after that, and Paul takes over. How did Peter end his days? More specifically: did he go to Rome, assume a leadership role in the Christian community there, and die a martyr's death under the Emperor Nero?

To answer that question we need to look at a range of evidence, because no one piece of it states in straightforward and unambiguous language either that Peter ever went to Rome or that he died there. Nonetheless, the evidence all points in that direction, and none contradicts it or points in another direction. The cumulative effect of this circumstantial evidence is persuasive. Moreover, even before we look at the evidence, we must remember that Rome was the communications center of the empire. Anybody with a message to spread would do well to go there, and Peter surely had a message to spread and a leadership role that required him to spread it. It seems almost inconceivable that for such a prominent figure in the New Testament the early community would have so soon after the event mistakenly remembered him. The consensus today among scholars from every religious tradition (and from no religious tradition) is that, from a strictly historical viewpoint, Peter almost certainly lived his last days in Rome and was martyred and buried there.

The evidence is textual and archeological. The New Testament provides a few clues. In the passage from the last chapter of John quoted above, Jesus predicts a martyr's death for Peter. More important is the ending of the First Epistle of Peter which, even if it was not written by Peter himself, was written under his inspiration. "By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God: stand fast in it. She [your sister church] who is in Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does my son Mark." Babylon was a common designation for Rome among Christians, a cryptic name necessary in time of persecution for a world power hostile to the Gospel. The passage suggests, or even indicates, that Peter is in Rome at the time the letter was written, which was probably about the year 63.

Sometime around the year 96 a letter, unsigned but written by a presbyter in Rome named Clement, was sent in the name of the Christian community in Rome to the community in Corinth. In one passage the author brings up Peter in a way that suggests both a special Roman relationship to him and direct information about what he suffered. "Let us set before our eyes the noble Apostle Peter, who by reason of wicked jealousy, not only once or twice but frequently endured suffering, and thus bearing his witness went to the glorious place that he narrated. By reason of rivalry and contention Paul showed how to win the prize for patient endurance."

The passage does not give us a two-plus-two-equals-four indication that Peter and Paul went to their deaths in Rome, but that is a reasonable inference from a document written just a generation after the events would have happened. About fifteen years after that, another leading figure in the early church, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in present-day Syria, wrote a series of letters to different churches when he was on his way to Rome, where he was going to be put to death for his Christian faith. In his letter to the church in Rome, he said in one passage, "I do not command you as Peter and Paul did. They were apostles. I am a convict. They were at liberty. I am in chains." The passage might mean that Ignatius could not command the Romans as if he had the authority of Peter and Paul, but that interpretation seems less likely than that Peter and Paul in some way commanded or headed the Church of Rome.

Much further along in the second century Saint Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, wrote that the church had been "founded and organized at Rome by the two glorious apostles, Peter and Paul." Irenaeus's writings were well known in his day, and no one, in the Mediterranean communities, which were jealous of any connection they might have had with the apostles, contested his assertion about the Roman church.

From the textual evidence, then, it is clear that by the end of the second century, at the latest, well informed Christians were convinced that Peter and Paul lived and died in Rome. Archeological evidence supports the textual. The most impressive instance of it comes from excavations under Saint Peter's basilica conducted in the middle of

the twentieth century. As mentioned, Constantine built the original church, which was substantially finished by the year 330. He built it where he did because by that time it was taken for certain that that was where Peter either died or was buried or both. That church was torn down in the sixteenth century to make way for the church we know today. But the new church was built on exactly the same spot, and the new altar located precisely where the original altar had been. In the early sixteenth century, when work on the new church was just beginning, the architect Bramante wanted to change the orientation of the church and move the altar, but Pope Julius II would not hear of it because he was not going to touch the tomb. And by tomb he meant Peter's.

That was the sixteenth century. We need to fast-forward to 1939. Monsignor Ludwig Kaas, then the administrator of the basilica, asked Pope Pius XI's permission to clean up the area under the church called the Sacred Grottoes, which is where many of the papal tombs were located. The area was in disarray. For reasons still not clear, the pope denied permission but, curiously enough, that is precisely where he wanted to be buried.

When Pius died on February 10, 1939, Kaas went down into the Grotto area looking for a place to install the pope's tomb. In the process he ordered a marble plaque to be removed from the wall and, as it was being done, the wall behind it collapsed and exposed an ancient vault. What else was there, in this now exposed area? When the new pope, Pius XII, heard of what happened, he ordered a full-scale investigation of the area, which was carried out over a ten-year period, followed by further excavations begun in 1952. The excavations uncovered a number of ancient tombs and a cemetery dating no later than the second century. They also uncovered a red-wall complex into which was built a small edifice, called a *Tropaion* (tomb or cenotaph), and alongside the edifice the wall containing devotional inscriptions referring to Peter.

The results of the excavations were published. Controversy ensued about the way the excavations were conducted and about conclusions drawn from them. Nonetheless, two facts are certain and uncontested. First, in the area of the excavations right under the main altar there was a shrine dedicated to Peter, seemingly a burial place, and dating from

about 150. At the time the shrine was built, Christians surely venerated the spot as sacred to Peter. Second, a century and a half later Constantine expended tremendous effort to build the church where he did. He had to desecrate a Roman cemetery and then move tons of dirt to level the area. Then he saw to it that the altar be located precisely over the spot where the little shrine was found.

Since all the evidence available, both textual and archeological, confirms the traditional belief about Peter and Paul in Rome and none contradicts it, the tradition can be accepted as true beyond reasonable doubt. Three questions, however, remain. First, did Peter and/or Paul found the Christian community in Rome? To that question the answer, despite what Irenaeus said, is a clear negative. The community was already in existence. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, surely written before he went there, is proof positive of the fact.

The next question: was Peter the first pope? The answer depends on the answer to the third question: was Peter the first bishop of Rome? And that answer is both yes and no. The earliest lists of popes begin not with Peter but with a man named Linus. The reason Peter's name does not appear is because he was an apostle, which was a super-category, much superior to pope or bishop.

But did he, apostle though he was, actually function as bishop, as the leader and supervisor of the church in Rome? The Christian community at Rome well into the second century operated as a collection of separate communities without any central structure. In that regard it was different from other cities at the time where, as in Antioch, Christians thought of themselves and acted as a single community over which a bishop presided. Rome was a constellation of house churches, independent of one another, each of which was loosely governed by an elder. The communities thus basically followed the pattern of the Jewish synagogues out of which they had developed. By the middle of the first century Rome had a large and prosperous Jewish community, with maybe as many as fifty thousand members, who worshiped in over a dozen synagogues.

If a bishop is an overseer who leads all the Christian communities within a city, then it seems Peter was not the bishop of Rome. But that is a narrow and unimaginative approach. Peter being Peter, who

had eaten and drunk with Jesus and was a witness to his resurrection, surely must have exercised a leadership role in Rome that was greater than that of any single elder/presbyter. It is inconceivable that Peter, an apostle, came to Rome, the capital of the empire, and did not have a determining role in that community whenever decisions were made. If that is true, then it follows that Peter can, with qualification but justly, be called the first bishop of Rome. And if he is the first bishop of Rome, then he is the first pope.



AFTER PETER AND PAUL

The period between the death of Peter and the toleration of Christianity by the Emperor Constantine in 313 has often been represented as a time of the pure church, the church of the catacombs, the church of great simplicity, the church where all Christians lived flawless lives and were ready to die for their faith. No doubt, there is much to admire about the Christians of these early centuries, but they were human beings with faults, failings, and sometimes grave weaknesses.

What did the church of Rome look like fifty or seventy-five years after Peter? Fundamental to it during this period was the ongoing impact of its origin in the Jewish community. Christians soon began to separate from the synagogues but, as mentioned, they organized themselves into similarly discrete units. They met, as did Christians in other cities, in the homes of wealthier Christians, and there they held their religious services. As the communities grew they rented space in public edifices. Each of these house-churches or neighborhood communities had a leader or elder—a “presbyter,” the synonym for elder. As late as the second century, a document called the *Shepherd of Hermas* spoke of the Church of Rome as having many rulers.

This raises a problem for those lists of popes that begin with Linus, Cletus, and Clement. The fact that Clement was responsible for the letter to the church of Corinth suggests that there was at least an informal hierarchy among the elders. There surely were occasions when the Christians in Rome wanted or needed to act as a group. Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans shows that, despite the fact that they had no central organization, they looked upon themselves as a single church and were looked upon that way by others. Clement's letter comes from the whole church of Rome, not from a particular house-church.

Elsewhere in the church bishops emerged as leaders of the community, a pattern eventually followed by Rome. The Christian communities provided for poor relief, with special care for orphans and widows. This activity needed organization and supervision, not simply on a house-to-house basis but in a way effective for a whole urban reality. Moreover, the Christian churches began to experience bitter disagreements.

An early and particularly divisive issue was about when to celebrate the most important of the Christian anniversaries, the resurrection of Christ. The Christians of the eastern part of the Roman Empire tended to celebrate it to coincide with the Jewish Passover, no matter on what day of the week Passover fell, whereas the Romans, for instance, celebrated it every Sunday. As time went on the Romans began to celebrate it more solemnly once a year on the Sunday after Passover. This issue soon erupted into a rancorous argument among the churches, and each church needed somebody to speak for it.

Another problem requiring the same solution was the relationship between the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, and the more properly Christian documents, those of the New Testament. In the middle of the second century a Christian named Marcion rejected not only the entire Old Testament but even parts of the New. What documents deserved to be considered normative and therefore canonical? A further, more profound question was the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit. A heresy known as Modalism sprang up that said that the distinction between Father and Son was purely nominal or only transitory, two "modes" of an identical reality. Then, a disciplinary question: what to do with apostates, those people who during persecu-

tion abandoned their faith by sacrificing to Roman gods and who afterward repented and wanted to be reconciled to the community. Clear leadership was required to deal with problems like these. No later than the middle of the second century, Rome like other cities had evolved into a pattern of a single leader for the community.

By that time the Church of Rome had also evolved from primarily Greek-speaking to Latin-speaking. The community then numbered at least fifteen thousand, probably many more. Within a century the number grew incrementally and more than doubled. By 300 it had tripled or quadrupled to become a sizable body that had made inroads into the highest levels of Roman society. The bishops were elected as elsewhere in the Christian world by the presbyters, now increasingly considered and called priests (*sacerdotes*), and they were then confirmed or approved in some fashion by other members of the local church. The process developed naturally, without legislation determining or governing it. This lack of clear procedures led to controversy and contention, which sometimes reached scandalous levels.

At first the bishops were married men with children. A number of the early popes were married, and a few of them in these early centuries were descended from previous popes. Pope Silverius (536–537), for instance, was the son of Pope Hormisdas (514–533). By the end of the second century, nonetheless, a consensus began to form that bishops could continue of course in their marriage but, once they were ordained bishop, were to live with their spouses as brother and sister—married, yes, but expected not to have marital relations with their wives. Indeed, around the year 305, the Synod of Elvira (near Granada) forbade not only bishops but also priests and deacons from such relations.

Meanwhile in Rome an ever sharper awareness developed that the Church of Rome was an apostolic church and that that fact gave it a special character. The Roman church, therefore, had special responsibilities regarding other churches. Correlatively, the other churches wanted to validate their decisions by being in communion with the Roman church and in concert with what the bishop of Rome thought best. In these first several centuries that concern to be in agreement with Rome was vague, unformulated, and did not everywhere prevail,

but it is clear that a pattern was in the making very early. The pattern would, however, have a rough time fully establishing itself.

This is still “the church of the catacombs,” not in the sense that Christians lived in them but in the metaphorical sense that even in the religiously tolerant atmosphere of the Roman Empire, Christians were persecuted. The problem the Romans had with Christians was their refusal to sacrifice to pagan gods and, more specifically, their refusal to sacrifice to the deified emperors. The Roman Empire, in which most of the population was illiterate, was held together and given a sense of cohesion through symbols and images. Busts and statues of the emperors were everywhere, and they represented a reality that went beyond their person. Not to sacrifice to them made Christians seem a danger to the state—made them, in our terms, unpatriotic, even subversive.

By the Middle Ages a tradition had grown up that all the popes from Peter until Constantine died as martyrs. Since the records are not always complete or reliable, it is often difficult to know just what happened to whom. Nonetheless, it is now certain that, while a few popes died as martyrs, the majority did not. Until the persecution of the Emperor Decius in the middle of the third century, the persecutions, even in the city of Rome, were intermittent, uncoordinated, and often local, which helps explain why popes escaped the death penalty.

This situation also meant that Christians as individuals (and also as communities) owned property. By no later than the third century, moreover, they had built and owned churches in which they could worship as they pleased, even though the property might be seized during a persecution and the community dispersed. The era of the house-church was definitively over. Christians in Rome were *not* living in catacombs because they had never lived in them and, despite romantic legends, did not use them even as places of refuge. The catacombs were simply their burial grounds in which, however, religious ceremonies were sometimes held.

Between Linus and Pope Miltiades, who was pope when Constantine issued his edict tolerating Christianity, the records list thirty-one popes—Linus, Cletus (or Anacletus), Clement, Evaristus, Alexander, Sixtus, Telesphorus, Hyginus, Pius, Anicetus, and so forth. Their names, the kind of functions they performed, and the dates of their

election and death become ever more reliable as time moves on. By the time of Pius (about 142–155) and Anicetus (about 155–165) the records provide basically sound but minimal information, and from then on they get more ample. A good deal is known about the popes of the third century.

Pope Callixtus I (217–222), is hardly typical, but his pontificate provides a window into the church of Rome at the time and reveals some of its problems. Callixtus, born in Rome, was a slave of a high-placed Christian named Carpophorus. He served as Carpophorus's financial steward, which meant he was entrusted with large sums of money. Something went wrong—Callixtus was accused of embezzlement. To avoid prosecution he fled the city and tried to board a ship at Ostia. But he was caught, brought back to Rome, and put to work on a treadmill. Eventually released, he was arrested for causing a disturbance in a synagogue on a Sabbath. This time he was handed over to the prefect of the city, who had him flogged and exiled to the mines in Sardinia, where many other Christians were also enslaved on that notorious “island of death.” He was probably about thirty years old at the time.

These events took place during the reign of Pope Victor (189–198), an African, the first Latin-speaking pope. Victor brought to his office an insistence on the strictest discipline for the clergy and was certainly the most forceful, even imperious, of the second-century popes. His attempts to get other churches to adopt the Roman calendar for the celebration of Easter were resisted and resented in Asia Minor, but they were probably primarily directed to dissidents within his own flock at Rome.

Victor is the first pope known to have had dealings with the imperial court. Marcia, the mistress of Emperor Commodus, was, it seems, a Christian. Through her the pope was able to arrange for the release of many of the Christians in Sardinia. Although Callixtus was not on the list of those to be released, he managed in this atmosphere of amnesty to obtain his freedom. He returned to Rome sometime around the year 190. He then began his clerical career and was soon ordained a deacon. Pope Zephyrinus, Victor's successor, appointed him administrator of the Christian cemetery on the Appian Way, probably the first

cemetery the church legally owned. It contains the “crypt of the popes” where the remains of a number of third-century bishops of Rome were laid to rest. Today it is called the catacomb of Callixtus.

Callixtus’s new position showed off his administrative skills, which resulted in an ever closer relationship with Zephyrinus. He quickly became a person to reckon with. Upon Zephyrinus’s death he was in 217 elected by the Roman clergy to succeed him, but Hippolytus, a Roman presbyter, refused to accept Callixtus and had himself elected by a faction of the clergy inimical to Callixtus. Two popes! This is the first of many such papal schisms. Hippolytus goes down in history as the first anti-pope, a person who claims to be pope but whom contemporaries or later historians judge illegitimate.

Hippolytus accused Callixtus of many things. He said he was a Modalist—but at least while Callixtus was pope he spoke in orthodox fashion about the Father and Son, and he excommunicated Sabellius, the intellectual leader of the Modalists. Hippolytus saw Callixtus as somebody weakening Victor’s strict policies and accused him of disciplinary laxity—Callixtus gave “full reign to human passions and said that he pardoned everyone’s sins.” More specifically, Hippolytus accused him of letting bishops stay in office even when they had committed some grievous fault or given scandal, of refusing to condemn clergy who married, and even of allowing into the episcopacy and priesthood men married two or three times.

These accusations came from a hostile source and must be judged accordingly. Hippolytus was a rigorist who could not tolerate the gentler approach that Callixtus took. Callixtus tried to reconcile to the church clergy that a harsh discipline had driven out, for which he should more likely be praised than excoriated. Despite his questionable early career, he conducted himself with dignity and effectiveness during his brief reign. He also is credited with setting an important precedent by permitting Christian women of noble birth to marry men of lower status, something that civil law disallowed. In so doing he staked a claim for the church in regulating matrimony.

Like all the popes of the first three centuries, Callixtus has been revered as a martyr but, since there was no persecution during his reign, he almost certainly was not one. According to one account he

was seized by a lynch-mob during a local anti-Christian riot in the Trastevere section of Rome, which probably erupted because of resentment of Christian expansion in the neighborhood, and thrown to his death from a window. Although we do not know for sure how he died, we know where he was buried. His tomb was discovered in 1960 under the ruins of an ancient Christian oratory on the Via Aurelia and was positively identified.

Callixtus's pontificate is significant in that it shows how it was possible to rise from the lowest social status to the highest position in the Church of Rome. It reveals the internal dissensions within the Christian community and the different approaches to ecclesiastical discipline, which would continue to disturb the peace of the church. It presents us with the first papal schism, which Hippolytus would continue during the reign of the next two popes until his death in 235.

But Hippolytus's claim to fame rests on a better basis than leading a schism. He was a prolific and respected writer on doctrinal matters and was one of the most accomplished theologians of his day. Unfortunately, his moral and disciplinary rigor turned him into a divisive figure in a community that needed to stand united. In 1959 Pope John XXIII installed an ancient statue of him at the entrance to the Vatican Library. The statue of this man of great learning is the first thing visitors to the library lay their eyes on.

Pope Stephen I is a great contrast to Callixtus, though like him he had a short reign, 254–257. Stephen was a Roman aristocrat from the Julian family, at the very opposite end of the social scale from Callixtus. He is in that regard symptomatic of the increasingly heavy infiltration of Christianity into the higher levels of Roman society by the middle of the third century. An ancient source states that Pope Lucius “after fulfilling his ministry for slightly less than eight months . . . on his deathbed passed his functions to Stephen.” The statement suggests the indeterminate way in which popes were chosen, though even with Lucius's designation Stephen probably required ratification by the clergy of the city. It also suggests that the transition was easy, without the contention that troubled Callixtus and his two successors. The political situation for Christians dramatically improved during Stephen's pontificate because the emperors Valerian and Gallienus

put an end, temporarily, to the persecutions instigated by Decius and Trebonius Gallus.

Stephen is important because through his conflict with Saint Cyprian, the powerful bishop of Carthage in North Africa (near present-day Tunis), he reveals the growing influence, prestige, and claims of the bishop of Rome, and reveals as well the resistance Roman claims met. During the persecution of Decius many clergy and laity had “lapsed” and sacrificed to the gods. Among them were two bishops from the Iberian peninsula. Basilides of León and Martial of Mérida had sacrificed and thus saved themselves. Their flocks repudiated them. When the persecution ended the question arose as to their fate. Basilides appealed to Stephen for himself and Martial. The pope readmitted them not only to communion with the church but also to their sees. The Spanish churches then appealed to Cyprian, who convoked a meeting, a “synod,” of North African bishops, which confirmed the deposition and excused Stephen’s actions on the grounds that he had been deceived by the reports he had received.

How to deal with these *lapsi* became a huge and ongoing problem for the church in this period. Stephen had to face it again when bishop Marcian of Arles refused to reconcile them even on their deathbeds. Cyprian on this occasion pleaded with Stephen to assemble the Gallic episcopacy against Marcian and have them come up with a successor. Cyprian’s letter was an implicit acknowledgment that Stephen had authority over other churches.

But the bishop of Carthage did not acknowledge any *carte blanche* authority of the bishop of Rome. The major conflict between these two powerful personalities erupted over the question of the validity of baptism administered by heretics or schismatics. Cyprian was adamant that it was not valid. He had on his side most of the churches of North Africa as well as those of Syria and Asia Minor, an impressive line up. Baptism could be conferred only within the church. This stance was simply a conclusion from Cyprian’s broader principle, “outside the church, no salvation” (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*), which would be invoked thousands upon thousands of times in subsequent centuries to justify or oppose a spectrum of theological opinions.

Stephen held the milder view that rebaptism was not necessary. He had on his side the tradition not only of the Roman church but also of the churches in Alexandria and Palestine. Stephen tried to impose the Roman tradition on the churches of Asia Minor and threatened to break communion with them if they resisted. Meanwhile, in 255 Cyprian wrote a treatise on the subject and then held two synods in Carthage, 255 and 256, that categorically affirmed his position. Without mentioning Stephen's name Cyprian obviously targeted him when he said that nobody sets himself up as a bishop over other bishops and tries to force his colleagues into obedience.

When Cyprian sent envoys to Stephen to justify his position, Stephen refused to see them or grant them hospitality, and treated them as heretics. This was a shocking breach of courtesy to a fellow bishop. The situation was explosive. Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria, who agreed with Stephen's position on baptism, wrote to him, however, and begged him to adopt a more conciliatory attitude. Stephen's enemies accused him of glorying in his position and of recklessly endangering the unity of the church. Bishop Firmilian of Cappadocia reacted strongly to Stephen's threats and reproached him for thinking his powers of excommunication were limitless.

It is difficult to imagine what might have happened if Stephen and Cyprian had lived even a little while longer. Stephen, though reputed to be a martyr, almost certainly died peacefully in Rome in 257. He was succeeded by the conciliatory Sixtus II. A year later Cyprian died a heroic martyr's death in a new persecution. With the deaths of the two protagonists, the tension was diffused. Eventually Stephen's position on baptism prevailed, was adopted even by the African churches by the beginning of the next century, and is the one followed today in mainline Christian churches. If Stephen is important for his strong stand on that issue, he is also important because it seems he was the first pope to find a basis for papal primacy over other churches in the passage from Matthew's gospel, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church."