

Catholic Encyclopedia - Papal Elections

The method of [electing](#) the [pope](#) has varied considerably at different periods of the [history of the Church](#).

As to the earliest ages, [Ferraris](#) (op. cit. *infra*) says that [St. Peter](#) himself constituted a senate for the [Roman Church](#), consisting of twenty-four [priests](#) and [deacons](#). These were the councilors of the [Bishop of Rome](#) and the electors of his successors. This statement is drawn from a canon in the "[Corpus Juris Canonici](#)" (can. "Si Petrus", caus. 8, Q. 1). Historians and canonists, however, generally hold that the Roman [bishopric](#) was filled on its [vacancy](#) in the same manner as other [bishoprics](#), that is, the election of the new [pope](#) was made by the neighboring [bishops](#) and the [clergy](#) and faithful of [Rome](#). Nevertheless, some maintain that the naming of the successor of [St. Peter](#) was restricted to the Roman [clergy](#), and that the people were admitted to a part in the elections only after the time of [Sylvester I](#) (fourth century).

After [Constantine](#) had given peace to the [Church](#), the [Christian](#) Roman emperors often took part in the institution of a new [pope](#) and at times their influence was very marked. From the fourth century onwards, therefore, a new force had to be reckoned with. The occasion for the interference of the Roman emperors and later of the kings of [Italy](#) was afforded by disputed elections to the [papal](#) chair. The most noted of the earlier instance was at the election of [Boniface I](#) (418). This gave occasion to the [decree](#) (c. 8, dist. 79) that when an election was disputed a new candidate should be chosen.

The interference of the [secular power](#) was always distasteful to the Roman [clergy](#), as shown by their unwillingness to observe decrees on the subject made even by [popes](#), as in the case of [Simplicius](#) and others. The example of the Roman emperors was followed by the barbarian kings of [Italy](#), of whom the first to interfere was [Theodoric the Ostrogoth](#), at the election of [Symmachus](#) in 498. On the recovery of their influence in the Italian peninsula, the Eastern emperors required that the choice of the electors for a new [pope](#) must be made known to the [Exarch](#) of [Ravenna](#), who in turn forwarded it to Constantinople, and until the emperor's confirmation was received, the candidate was not to be acknowledged as [Bishop of Rome](#). This resulted in long [vacancies](#) of the [Holy](#)

See. The custom lasted until the pontificate of [Benedict II](#) (684-85). A similar claim was put forward by the Western emperors in the [Middle Ages](#), and some demanded it owing to a concession made by [Adrian I](#) to [Charlemagne](#). This pretended concession is now recognized as spurious. As to the so-called confirmation of papal elections by the [secular power](#), [Ferraris](#) (loc. cit. *infra*) notes that it must not be so understood as to imply that the new [pope](#) received the [papal](#) power from the emperor. This would be [heretical](#), for the elected candidate receives his power from [Christ](#).

The confirmation of the emperor, then, was only to ensure that the canons of the [Church](#) should be carried out without hindrance from factious and seditious dissenters. It must be admitted that the Holy Roman emperors sometimes made use of their overwhelming power unscrupulously, and more than once candidates were elected to the [papacy](#) by direct imperial [nomination](#). [Otto III](#) is credited with the [nomination](#) of [Gregory V](#) and [Sylvester II](#), and [Henry III](#) with the effectual naming of [Clement II](#), [Damasus II](#), [Leo IX](#), and [Victor II](#). But it is obvious that such [nomination](#) is not real election, for the acceptance of the legal electors was [necessary](#) to ratify the choice, though undoubtedly they would naturally be swayed by circumstances to give effect to the imperial preference.

It has sometimes been said that in the earlier ages [popes](#) have appointed their successors in the pontificate. Thus, [St. Peter](#) is said to have so chosen [Clement I](#). The authority on which the statement rests is now generally acknowledged to be [apocryphal](#). [Boniface II](#) chose [Vigilius](#) for his successor in 531, but later repented and publicly withdrew the [nomination](#). [Baronius](#) (H.E., ann. 1085, 1087) states that [Gregory VII](#) in 1085 elected [Victor III](#) as his successor; that [Victor](#) in like manner chose [Urban II](#) in 1086, and [Urban](#) elected [Paschal II](#) in 1099. It is to be noted that the canon "Si Transitus" in the "[Corpus Juris](#)" (can. "Si Transc.", 10, dist. 70) seems to imply the right of the [pope](#) to nominate his successor, since its opening words are: "If the death of the [pope](#) take place so unexpectedly that he cannot make a [decree](#) concerning the election of his successor, etc.". However, these so-called elections were never more than nominations, for none of the [persons](#) thus named ever presumed to declare themselves [popes](#) before the ratification of the legal electors had been obtained.

It is certain at present, that, according to ecclesiastical law (c. "Episcopo", 3; c. "Plerique", 5; can. "Moyses", 6, caus. 8, Q. 1), the pope cannot elect his successor. It is commonly held also that he is prohibited from doing so by Divine law, though the contrary has also been held by canonists. As to the gradual restrictions and determinations governing the mode of election of the pontiffs, we note that in 606 Boniface III decreed that the electors should not meet until the third day after the pope's burial. In 769 a decree was framed in a synod of the Lateran, that the Roman clergy were to choose as pope only a priest or deacon, and forbade the laity to take any part in the election. The newly-elected was, however, to receive the homage of the laity before he was conducted to the Lateran basilica. This decree caused widespread discontent among the influential laymen, and Nicholas I in a Roman Synod held in 862 restored the right of suffrage to the Roman nobles. John IX in 898 confirmed the custom of having the consecration of the new pontiff take place in the presence of the imperial ambassadors. In 963, the Emperor Otto I endeavoured to bind the Romans by oath not to elect anyone as pope until he had been nominated by the emperor.

An epoch-making decree in the matter of papal elections is that of Nicholas II in 1059. According to this constitution, the cardinal bishops are first to meet and discuss the candidates for the papacy, and select the names of the most worthy. They are then to summon the other cardinals and, together with them, proceed to an election. Finally, the assent of the rest of the clergy and the laity to the result of the suffrage is to be sought. The choice is to be made from the Roman Clergy, unless a fit candidate cannot be found among them. In the election regard is to be had for the rights of the Holy Roman emperor, who in turn is to be requested to show similar respect for the Apostolic See. In case the election cannot be held in Rome, it can validly be held elsewhere. What the imperial rights are is not explicitly stated in the decree, but it seems plain from contemporary evidence that they require the results of the election to be forwarded to the emperor by letter or messenger, in order that he may assure himself of the validity of the election. Gregory VII (1073), however, was the last pope who asked for imperial confirmation. It will be seen that the decree of Pope Nicholas reserves the actual election to the cardinals, but requires the assent (*laudatio*) of the lower clergy and laity.

The [Tenth Ecumenical Synod](#) (Lateran) in 1139 restricted, however, the entire choice to the [cardinals](#), and in 1179, [another Lateran Council](#) under [Alexander III](#) made the rule that the [pope](#) is to be chosen by a two-thirds majority of the electors who are present. This last [decree](#) did not state what was to be done in case such a majority could not be obtained. When the [cardinals](#) found themselves face to face with this contingency on the death of [Clement IV](#) in 1268, they commissioned six [cardinals](#) as plenipotentiaries to decide on a candidate. The [vacancy](#) of the [Holy See](#) had lasted for two years and nine months. To prevent a recurrence of this [evil](#), the [Second Council of Lyons](#) under [Gregory X](#) (1274) decreed that ten days after the [pope's](#) decease, the [cardinals](#) should assemble in the palace in the city in which the [pope](#) died, and there hold their electoral meetings, entirely shut out from all outside influences. If they did not come to an agreement on a candidate in three days, their victuals were to be lessened, and after a further delay of five days, the food supply was to be still further restricted. This is the origin of [conclaves](#).

The [decretal](#) of [Gregory X](#) on this subject is called "Ubi periculum majus". For the later regulations governing papal elections see [CONCLAVE](#). According to certain ancient canons (can. "Oportet", 3; can. "Nullus", 4, dist. 79), only [cardinals](#) should be chosen [pope](#). However, [Alexander III](#) decreed (cap. "Licet", 6, "De elect.") that "he, without any exception, is to be acknowledged as pontiff of the Universal Church who has been elected by two-thirds of the [cardinals](#)." As late as 1378, [Urban VI](#) was chosen, though not a [cardinal](#) (consult, however, Constitut. 50 of [Sixtus V](#) "Postquam", § 2). A [layman](#) may also be elected [pope](#), as was [Celestine V](#) (1294). Even the election of a married man would not be invalid (c. "Qui uxorem", 19, caus. 33, Q. 5). Of course, the election of a [heretic](#), [schismatic](#), or [female](#) would be null and void. Immediately on the canonical election of a candidate and his acceptance, he is [true pope](#) and can exercise full and absolute [jurisdiction](#) over the whole Church. A papal election, therefore, needs no confirmation, as the pontiff has no superior on earth.