

## Who and What is the Pope

### Overview

The Pope is the spiritual leader for Roman Catholics throughout the world and is the direct successor to Saint Peter. The Catholic Church with about 1.2 Billion members – out of a worldwide population of 6.5 Billion people – is the only major religion with a centralized leader.



The title of “Pope” comes from Italian and means papa – or daddy. The Pope is spiritual leader of the Catholic Church and literally walks in the “Shoes of the Fisherman”. What this means is that the Pope is the successor to Peter who was the first leader – although the term Pope was not used at that time. The reigning Pope is also the Bishop of Rome and his church is actually Saint John Lateran – not Saint Peter’s Basilica.

### What is the history of the papacy?

When one reads the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles it becomes very clear that Saint Peter was clearly the leader of the other 11 Apostles, the disciples and other followers of Christ. Throughout the Gospels, you will see that Peter is in the limelight and he is the one Apostle who is always mentioned first.

Note carefully the change in name for Peter as this has important considerations. In the bible, to the Jewish religious culture of the time, names were extremely important. Your name said who you were and was meaningful so many people’s chosen name described an event or time relevant to that person. Therefore, a change in name also signified a dramatic change in who this person was.

The account in Acts 15 further demonstrates the importance of Peter as a leader. In this account, Paul visits Jerusalem to resolve a serious issue in

the early church. Some refer to Acts 15 as the first church council. Throughout the Acts of the Apostles, we see Peter taking charge of the early church right up until his crucifixion – upside down – in Rome.

Counting Saint Peter as the first Pope, there have been 264 successors to the bishop of Rome. Therefore, Pope Benedict is the 265<sup>th</sup> Pope. A complete list can be seen in the chart on the wall of the Summerville Chapel. In the year 1978, we had three popes in office. Paul VI died August 6<sup>th</sup> 1978 after 15 years in the office and was succeeded by John Paul I who died after only 33 days as the Pope. He was succeeded by John Paul II who chose his name in respect for the deceased pope.

### What is the method for choosing a new Pope?

Since 1179 the Pope has been elected by the College of Cardinals in a closed session called a **conclave**. The Cardinals lock themselves up in the Sistine Chapel and pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance in a discernment process.

### An unbroken succession from Peter to today

Succession is an important consideration since Catholics can trace all of its ordained ministers – from Popes to Priests – all back to Saint Peter. When a priest in the Catholic Church is ordained, the Bishop performs an act of “laying of hands” upon the new priest. In doing so, he repeats what happened beginning with Peter – as this was how they passed on what Jesus left them. That is, everyone one of these Catholic priests can trace himself back to Peter. The protestant churches lost this succession when they broke away from the Catholic Church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### What does it mean when the Pope is infallible?

Infallibility is a protection against error. When the Pope speaks officially on matters of faith or morals this means that he will not contradict anything that Jesus has taught. It is a common misconception that the Pope uses this power to dictate and uses it often. The last time this occurred was in 1960 when Pope Pius XII declared the Assumption of Mary into heaven as a dogma. The time before that event was in 1854 for the Immaculate Conception dogma so you can see this is not a frequent event.