

# The History of the Papacy

# The Theological Basis: Petrine Primacy

## Foundations of Papal Authority

Catholic tradition teaches that Jesus gave Peter a unique role as the foundation of the Church, granting him supreme spiritual authority and the "keys" to lead all believers.

This teaching, called Petrine Primacy, draws from Jesus telling Peter he would be the rock on which the Church is built (Matthew 16:18–19).

Additional support comes from Jesus telling Peter to "strengthen your brothers" and to "feed my sheep" — passages seen as confirming his leadership role.

### Key Scripture

*Matthew 16:18–19*

Jesus told Peter he would be the rock of the Church, gave him the keys of the kingdom, and declared that whatever Peter bound or loosed on earth would be bound or loosed in heaven.

# Apostolic Succession & the Choice of Rome

## Peter’s Journey to Rome

After Jesus’ ascension, Peter traveled to Rome — the political capital of the known world. There he led the growing Christian community and was ultimately martyred under Emperor Nero around 64 AD, traditionally crucified upside down on Vatican Hill.

## The Line of Succession

Because Peter died as the leader of the Roman church, each succeeding Bishop of Rome claimed to inherit his unique authority. This unbroken chain of leadership is called Apostolic Succession — the principle that Peter’s God-given role passes to each new bishop of his church.

### Key Timeline

| | |
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| ~30 AD | Jesus commissions Peter |
| ~50s AD | Peter arrives in Rome |
| ~64 AD | Peter martyred under Nero |
| ~67 AD | Linus becomes Bishop of Rome |
| ~80s AD | Clement leads the Roman church |

# Early Church Leadership

## Bishop of Rome

Early leaders like Linus, Cletus, and Clement were identified primarily as the Bishop of Rome — not as a supreme global authority.

## Moral Compass

The Roman church was held in high esteem, serving as a moral guide and primary court of appeals for disputes among early Christian communities.

## Decentralized Network

There was no global administrative apparatus or absolute jurisdictional control. Christianity operated as a highly decentralized network of independent local churches.

# Imperial Legalization (4th–5th Century)

## 313 AD

**Edict of Milan**

Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity, transforming the Church from a persecuted underground movement into a state-recognized institution. This single act changed everything.

### Filling the Power Vacuum

As the Western Roman Empire crumbled, cities lost their civic leadership.

The Bishop of Rome stepped in to maintain municipal order, manage food supplies, and negotiate with invading forces.

The Church effectively filled the secular power vacuum, merging spiritual authority with civic responsibility.

# Defining the Title: From Nickname to Monopoly

The word "Pope" comes from the Greek and Latin words for "father." In the early centuries, it was a common term of respect used for all senior bishops and patriarchs — not just the Bishop of Rome.

The Patriarch of Alexandria, for example, was regularly called "Pope" long before Rome claimed exclusive use of the title.

The earliest known physical link between the title and Rome appears on the tomb of Bishop Marcellinus, who died in 304 AD. But it remained a shared title across multiple Christian centers for centuries.

**1073 AD**

Gregory VII decreed the title "Pope" belongs exclusively to the Bishop of Rome, making it a violation of church law for any other leader to use it.

# Three Popes Who Shaped the Office

## Leo I (440–461)

*The First "True" Pope*

Built the legal and theological framework for papal supremacy. Convinced the emperor to declare that the Bishop of Rome's decisions had the force of law. Famously negotiated with Attila the Hun to save Rome.

## Gregory I (590–604)

*The Great Administrator*

Organized public welfare amid plague and invasion. Repaired infrastructure, directed defense, and pushed missionary efforts into Western Europe. Cemented Rome as the undeniable headquarters of the Western Church.

## Gregory VII (1073)

*The Absolute Authority*

Published 27 assertions of total papal authority. Declared the title "Pope" unique in the world. Claimed authority to depose emperors and release subjects from oaths to unjust rulers.

# Temporal Powerhouse (8th–14th Century)

## Sovereign King & Spiritual Leader

The Donation of Pippin in the 8th century established the Papal States, giving the Pope physical territory and making him a sovereign ruler. For the first time, the Bishop of Rome was both a spiritual leader and a political king.

The pope fielded standing armies, enacted civil legislation, levied taxes, and successfully claimed the authority to crown and depose secular monarchs across Europe.

## Powers of the Medieval Papacy

**Standing Armies**
Military forces under papal command

**Civil Legislation**
Laws governing the Papal States

**Taxation**
Revenue collection across territories

**Crowning Monarchs**
Authority over royal succession

**Excommunication**
Power to ban rulers from the Church

# The Modern Spiritual Pivot (19th Century–Present)

## Before 1870

- Sovereign ruler of the Papal States
- Commanded military forces
- Enacted civil and criminal law
- Levied taxes on citizens
- Political power rivaling kings

## After 1870

- Italy seized the Papal States
- Stripped of military and civil power
- Codified Papal Infallibility doctrine
- Shifted to moral & spiritual authority
- Global diplomatic and pastoral role



# Opposition & Schisms

How the Christian world pushed back against Roman authority

# The Pentarchy & Early Resistance

## The Five Major Centers of Early Christianity

| Rome | Constantinople | Alexandria | Antioch | Jerusalem |
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### "First Among Equals" — Not Supreme

Early Christianity was governed through five major centers of leadership. The Eastern bishops of Constantinople, Antioch, and Alexandria consistently resisted Rome's attempts to intervene in their regional affairs.

While they granted Rome an honorary first place out of respect for Peter and Paul's martyrdoms, they explicitly rejected the idea that Rome had direct administrative authority over the other independent churches. Each see governed itself.

# The Great Schism of 1054

## Western Church (Rome)

Added to the Nicene Creed that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father "and the Son" — a change the East saw as unauthorized.

Insisted the Pope held supreme authority over all churches worldwide.

A papal representative placed an excommunication order on the altar of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

## Eastern Church (Constantinople)

Rejected the creed change as textually and theologically unauthorized.

Maintained a governance model of councils of equal bishops — no single supreme leader.

The Patriarch responded with a mutual excommunication, permanently splitting the Church.

# The Protestant Reformation (16th Century)

### Scripture Alone

The Reformers asserted the Bible is the sole rule of faith. Papal decrees, church law, and councils were viewed as human traditions that often contradicted Scripture — stripping the Pope of authority to dictate doctrine.

### Priesthood of All Believers

Drawing from the New Testament, Protestants argued every believer has direct access to God through Christ. An earthly hierarchy with a supreme leader was seen as redundant and unauthorized by Scripture.

### The Pope as Antichrist

Luther and Calvin identified the Pope as the biblical "Man of Lawlessness." They argued that by claiming power to forgive sins and demand total submission, the papacy usurped authorities belonging only to Christ.

# The Restoration Movement (19th Century)

Led by Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone, this American movement sought to bypass all historical creeds and restore the Church to its original New Testament pattern.

## An Unauthorized Innovation

The New Testament contains no mention of a "Pope," cardinals, a global hierarchy, or an earthly headquarters. The entire papal office was classified as a slow human invention developed centuries after the apostles.

## A Catalyst for Division

Human traditions and structural hierarchies were seen as the primary barriers dividing Christians into competing camps. The movement’s motto: promote unity through Scripture alone.

## Local Church Autonomy

Each local church must be entirely independent, self-governing, and accountable only to Christ. No external boards, central headquarters, or supreme earthly leaders. "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent."

# Key Takeaways

The papal office traces its theological roots to Peter, but its institutional structure developed over centuries — not overnight.

The papacy evolved from a moral leadership role into a medieval political powerhouse, and then pivoted to a purely spiritual authority after 1870.

The claim of supreme papal authority was never universally accepted, producing the Great Schism of 1054 and the Protestant Reformation.

The Restoration Movement challenged all human hierarchies, calling Christians back to the simplicity of the New Testament church.