



THE COLLEGE OF CARDINALS

Following that of pope, the title of cardinal is the highest dignity in the Catholic Church, and was recognized as early as the pontificate of Sylvester I (314-335). Rooted in the Latin word *cardo*, meaning hinge, cardinals are created by a decree of the Roman Pontiff and chosen to serve as his principal collaborators and assistants. Cardinals are considered “princes of the Church” and are addressed by the title of "Eminence."

History

In early years, "cardinal" was a title attributed generically to ecclesiastics in the service of a church or diaconate, particularly to ecclesiastics in Rome who were the pope's counselors. Later this title was reserved for those responsible for the ***titular churches***¹ (*tituli cardinales*) of Rome and the most important churches in Italy and abroad. Gradually, from Pope Nicholas II in 1059 to Pope Eugenio IV in 1438, this title acquired the prestige which still marks it today.

The College of Cardinals was constituted in its current form in 1150: it has a dean², who is the bishop of Ostia, along with the other titular church which he already holds, and a camerlengo³ or chamberlain, who administers the goods of the Church when the See of Peter is vacant. The dean is chosen from those cardinals of episcopal rank who possess a title to a ***suburbicarian diocese***⁴, which are the six dioceses closest to Rome (Albano, Frascati, Ostia, Palestrina, Porto-Santa Ruffina and Velletri-Segni).

Responsibilities of the College of Cardinals

Canons 349 through 359 of the Church's *Code of Canon Law* govern the makeup and responsibilities of the College.

According to Canon 349, "The cardinals of the Holy Roman Church constitute a special college whose responsibility is to provide for the election of the Roman Pontiff in accord with the norm of special law; the cardinals assist the Roman Pontiff collegially when they are called together to deal with questions of major importance; they do so individually when they assist the Roman Pontiff especially in the daily care of the universal Church by means of the different offices which they perform."

¹ Words in bold italics can be found in the glossary.

² Currently, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger is the dean; Cardinal Angelo Sodano is the sub-dean.

³ Currently, Eduardo Martinez Somalo is the Camerlengo.

⁴ Canon 352, paragraph 2.

Elevation to the College of Cardinals

Cardinals are “created” by a decree of the pope read during an ordinary consistory in the presence of the College of Cardinals.⁵ The requisites for eligibility are more or less the same as those laid down by the Council of Trent in the 24th session of November 11, 1563. These include men who have received priestly ordination and are distinguished for their doctrine, piety and prudence in performing their duties; those who are not yet bishops must receive the episcopal consecration.⁶

The rite used for the creation of new cardinals was introduced at the consistory of June 28, 1991. During the ceremony the Pope reads the formula of creation and solemnly proclaims the names of the new cardinals. The first of the new cardinals then addresses the Holy Father, on behalf of everyone. This is followed by several readings from Scripture, the Pope’s homily, the Profession of Faith and the taking of the oath by each cardinal.

Each new cardinal then approaches the Holy Father and kneels before him to receive the cardinal's *birretta* and to be assigned a title or deaconry. The Pope places the birretta on his head and says, in part: "(This is) red as a sign of the dignity of the office of a cardinal, signifying that you are ready to act with fortitude, even to the point of spilling your blood for the increase of the Christian faith, for peace and harmony among the people of God, for freedom and the spread of the Holy Roman Catholic Church.”

During a separate ceremony, typically the following day, the Holy Father will preside at the concelebration of Mass with the new cardinals, and after the homily will give each of them the cardinal's ring as "the sign of dignity, pastoral care and the most solid communion with the See of Peter."

Ranks of Cardinals

Canon 350, paragraph 1, states: "The College of Cardinals is divided into three ranks: the episcopal rank, which consists of both the cardinals to whom the Roman Pontiff assigns the title of a suburbicarian church and the oriental patriarchs who have become members of the college of cardinals; the presbyteral rank; and the diaconal rank."

Consistories

As advisors to the pope, the cardinals act collegially with him through meetings called consistories. A consistory is an assembly of the College of Cardinals, convened by and under the leadership of the Holy Father, for the purpose of discussing Church business. According to Canon 353, these are either ordinary or extraordinary. All cardinals, or at least those who live in Rome, are called to attend ordinary consistories. The entire College of Cardinals is called to attend an extraordinary consistory which usually treats particular needs of the Church or serious problems facing the Church. Only ordinary consistories may be public, that is, where people other than the cardinals and Holy Father are present (such as the consistory to create new cardinals).

⁵ *Code of Canons*, canon 351, paragraph 2.

⁶ Canon 351, paragraph 1.

Papal Electors

Since 1059, cardinals have been the exclusive electors of the Pope, whom they elect in conclave on the basis of the latest guidelines contained in Pope John Paul II's apostolic constitution *Universi Dominici Gregis*, promulgated on February 22, 1996. During the *sede vacante* (or vacancy of the Apostolic See), the College of Cardinals plays an important role in the general government of the Church and, following the Lateran Treaties of 1929, also in the government of Vatican City State.

Like all bishops, cardinals are asked to present their resignation upon reaching 75 years of age, although the pope may choose to delay acceptance of the resignation. Cardinals over the age of 80, however, are no longer eligible to enter into conclave. They also cease to be members of offices of the Roman Curia or of any permanent organism or dicastery of the Holy See.

Number of Cardinals

The number of cardinals varied almost until the end of the 16th century and continued to increase in keeping with the successive development of the Church's affairs. The Councils of Constance (1414-18) and Basel (1431-37) limited the number to 24. By the time of Paul IV (1555-59), the number had risen to 70 and increased to 76 under Pius IV (1559-65). Sixtus V, with the constitution *Postquam verus* of December 1586, established the number of cardinals at 70. The number of cardinals has increased, however, and it reached 144 after the *consistory* of March 1973. Pope Paul VI, in the Motu proprio *Ad Purpuratorum Patrum* of February 11, 1965, expanded the College of Cardinals to include the patriarchs of the Eastern Catholic Churches. "The oriental patriarchs who have become members of the College of Cardinals have as their title their own patriarchal see."⁷

Composition of the College of Cardinals

As of March 18, 2005, there are 183 members of the College of Cardinals, 170 of whom were created by Pope John Paul II. Of these 183, 66 are over the age of 80 and cannot enter into conclave. Of the remaining 117 cardinal electors, all but 3 have been appointed by John Paul II.

There has been a strong internationalization of the college over the past 35 years. The current members of the College of Cardinals represent five continents and come from 65 countries. There are 95 from Europe, 18 from North America, 31 from Latin America, 16 from Africa, 18 from Asia, and 5 from Oceania.

⁷ Canon 350, paragraph 3.

Glossary

Birretta – square, ridged cap worn by cleric in the Latin Catholic Church, the color indicating the rank of the cleric. The cardinal’s biretta is cardinalatial red.

Code of Canon Law – the codified body of general laws governing the Latin rite of the Catholic Church, promulgated in 1983. Eastern Catholic Churches are governed in common by the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, promulgated in 1990.

Consistory – an assembly of the College of Cardinals, convened by and under the leadership of the Holy Father, for the purpose of discussing Church business.

Suburbicarian diocese – the six dioceses around Rome, which together with Rome, form the ecclesiastical province of Rome. The six cardinals with the rank of cardinal-bishop are their titular heads. With the exception of Ostia, each has its own residential bishop. The cardinal who is made titular head of Ostia is the dean of the College of Cardinals. He is also always titular head of another of the suburbicarian dioceses.

Titular church – When an individual is named a cardinal, he is given title to a parish church in Rome or to one of Rome’s seven neighboring dioceses. The titles are largely honorary and entail no jurisdiction.

Sources: Adapted from Vatican Information Service reports of January 23, 2001, and February 20, 2001; information on the Vatican Web site

<http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/documentazione/documents/cardinali_documentazione/cardinali_documentazione_generale_en.html>; the *Code of Canon Law*; and Catholic News Service’s *Stylebook on Religion 2000*.