

# Bishops in the early church history essay



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The term Pope stems from “ Papa” (Latin) and the Popes’ office is referred to as the Papacy. The Papacy is in charge of the spiritual welfare of the members of the Catholic Church and has its beginnings in the Roman Western Society. Currently “ Vatican City” is a city-state where the Pope is the Head of State of and carries out political and social rule over in addition to meeting the city’s spiritual needs.

The ascendancy of the bishop of Rome over the whole of the Catholic Church, an institution recognized as “ the papacy,” took centuries to grow. During the first few hundred years of the church, the title “ pope,” which denotes “ father,” was applied for any important and esteemed bishop. Furthermore, the bishop of Rome was one of a number of significant bishops in Christendom.

Rome had always been treasured for her relationship with Paul and Peter and her stand as the Church in the Empire’s capital. This was particularly noticed after Christianity was made legal under Constantine which made the importance of that office grow further with each passing roman bishop. The dogma of the authority of the pope ultimately reached its height in the late 13th century, when Pope Boniface VIII asserted full religious and non-religious authority over every human being.

## **Bishops in the Early Church**

**During the early periods of Christianity, five cities arose as significant core of Christianity. These were Rome, Jerusalem, Antioch, Constantinople and Alexandria. Even though the Roman Church was highly regarded, the Churches in the East in general had more influence and numbers than those of the West. Following the granting of legal status to Christianity by the Decree of Milan, the church took up the same governmental structure as the Empire whereby geographical provinces were ruled by bishops. These bishops of key cities therefore rose in power.**

**Rome wasn't only the city that could profess to have had a unique responsibility in Christ's Church. Jerusalem had the reputation of being the city of Christ's death and resurrection. Furthermore, a significant church council took place there in the first century. Antioch was the location where the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians". Alexandria was an important early center of Christian belief. Constantinople developed into a very significant city after Constantine shifted his capital there in 330 AD.**

**Nevertheless, by the fifth century, the bishop of Rome started claiming his superiority over all other bishops. Moreover, several church fathers made this claim for him as well.**

**Why Rome?**

**Rome's association with Peter was the main "spiritual" reason its ultimate dominance. According to customs, Peter visited Rome all through his life and, more significantly, was martyred there. This is affirmed by the belief that his remains are below the St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City. St. Paul was thought to have been martyred in Rome as well.**

**The majority of the claims for the pope's authority are supported by one major argument- the so called Petrine theory. Affirmed by the Council of Florence in 1439, outlined as a subject of faith by the First Vatican Council in 1870, and approved by the Second Vatican Council in 1964, Jesus Christ bestowed the position of Primacy in the church upon Peter only. The First Vatican Council based their claim on a classical New Testament text long linked with it. In Mathew 16, Jesus inquires from his disciples who they think he is. Peter responds, " You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus responds: " Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."**

**Since the word “ Peter” stands for “ rock, the above stated verse has been taken by the Roman Catholic Church to mean that Peter was charged with the task of overseeing the formation of God’s Church, had spiritual power over it which he passed on to successive Popes (Protestants disagree that the “ rock” signifies not only to Peter but to his admission of faith.) Additional biblical support for their claim has been found in the Gospel of John, whereby the resurrected Jesus directs Peter to “ feed my sheep.” An imagery of St. Peter watching over the gates of heaven has its origin from the Matthew 16 passage.**

**The Bishop of Rome was one of the most significant Bishops of Western Europe up until the Reformation due to a number of factors. Being the city which lay claim to having the first martyr, (Peter), Rome was the historical capital of the empire and a politically key city, so it was expected that the bishop of the city would in addition be important.**

**Furthermore, the pope was the most dominant figure that remained in Rome after Constantine shifted the capital of the empire to Constantinople. The Bishop of Rome claimed control over all other bishops and Christians based on biblical passages, but some of it was as a result of political and cultural realities. In Western Europe, there existed no other cities to rival Rome giving the Roman Bishop automatic prestige. In the east however, there were rivals such as Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople and Jerusalem. The bishop of Constantinople never did stoop to Roman claims. Additional prestige on Rome was as a result of tradition. It was a city of martyrs. The earliest persecutions, initiated by Nero, occurred at Rome. In addition, Peter was “martyred at Rome.” As earlier observed, Rome was the solitary city in the Western hemisphere of the Empire while the rest (four) were found in the Eastern region of the Empire. As the two areas became increasingly culturally and politically advanced, the eastern region was in charge of decisions concerning the church and political life whereas Rome was sought out regarding decisions of vital nature, whether it be of political or religious side.**

**In addition, the barbarian attacks of the fifth century were significant. Leo I, considered by many as the first pope in the modern sense, was influential in convincing Attila the Hun not to attack Rome in 452. When it finally fell to the Vandals in 455, Leo persuaded their leader not to set the city on fire. These endeavors further added to the prestige to the bishop of Rome.**

Besides, when Rome fell to the barbarians in 455 AD, the church grew to be the defender of order, justice, and the remainder of civilization. The bishop of Rome was active in recapturing the harmony and steadiness that had been crushed by the attacks. Compared to the West, the Eastern side of the empire endured for another 1000 years, hence the bishops there didn't match the political significance as their Roman counterparts.