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Background: What is a cardinal? [RSS](#)

Mar. 24, 2006 (CWNews.com) - A cardinal is appointed by the Pope to serve as one of his key advisers. Although they are often called to provide counsel for the Pontiff, the most critical responsibility for the cardinals comes when the Pope dies, and the College of Cardinals chooses his successor.

Cardinals are ordinarily bishops who hold important ecclesiastical office-- as leaders of prominent archdioceses, or heads of the Vatican's major congregations. Occasionally the Pope may appoint less prominent clerics, usually older men, as a way of honoring them for their contributions to the Church. Since the 1960s the rules governing the College of Cardinals require that every member must be a bishop, although the Pope can waive that requirement, and has done so in a few cases.

The College of Cardinals represents the clergy of Rome, who assist the Pope-- the Bishop of Rome-- and elect a successor when the Pontiff dies. As the institution first developed, the cardinals were the clergy of important parishes in Rome and bishops of the suburban dioceses. To this day each cardinal is assigned to a titular parish in Rome. The cardinals are designated as cardinal bishops, cardinal priests, and cardinal deacons. These distinctions are almost exclusively ceremonial.

Selection as a cardinal is traditionally a sign of the Pope's recognition that a bishop is outstanding in his faith and fidelity to the Church. The red color of the cardinal's vestments is a reminder that these prelates must be prepared to shed their blood, if necessary, for the welfare of the Church.

Glossary Terms: [prelate](#)

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Posted by: Dutch - Mar. 24, 2006 6:55 PM ET USA

While I cannot disagree with anything you say, it is at least remarkable that there are three grades of cardinals, and that all cardinals are allocated a parish in Rome. Thus, a conclave of cardinals choosing a new Pope is not really different from a chapter choosing a bishop.

Remember - when Bishop Bomers in Haarlem died, the chapter decided to meet and choose a new Bishop within days. Rome intervened by appointing an administrator who was also a Bishop - thereby avoiding the chapter meeting.

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