

# On Deposing Popes: A Historical Review



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Cover Image: Henry III at the Synod of Sutri, deposing three papal claimants.

# Table of Contents

Asking the Question .....	4
To Resign or to be Deposed.....	5
Historical Review of Church Teaching .....	7
First Millennium .....	7
Decretum Gratiani (12th Century) .....	8
Decree of Celestine V (1294) .....	9
Council of Constance (1414-1418) .....	10
Council of Florence (1438-1445) .....	10
First Vatican Council (1869-1870) .....	11
1917 Code Canon Law (1917).....	12
1983 Code of Canon Law (1983).....	13
Historical Review of Papal Resignations and Possible Depositions .....	14
Early Church .....	14
Pontian (230-235) .....	14
Marcellinus (296-304) .....	14
Liberius (352-366) .....	15
Martin I (649-655).....	15
Saeculum Obscurum .....	15
John X (914-928) .....	15
John XII (955-964) .....	16
Benedict V (964) .....	16
Middle Ages .....	16
John XVIII (1004-1009) .....	16
Benedict IX (1032-1044, 1045, 1047-1048) .....	17
Celestine V (1294).....	18
Great Western Schism.....	18
Gregory XII (1406-1415).....	18
Eugene IV (1431-1447).....	20
Modern Times .....	20
Benedict XVI (2005-2013) .....	20
Answering the Question .....	22

## **Asking the Question**

Throughout his five-year reign Pope Francis has been a controversial figure. He has pushed for novelties and innovations to both the papacy and the Church itself, from superficialities like refusing to live in the papal apartments to more substantial changes like permitting communion for the divorced-and-remarried. These innovations have been welcomed in some quarters, but have been strongly resisted in others.

The resistance to Francis has grown with each passing year. At first, it was the reserve of only traditionalist Catholics. As the changes kept coming, more and more Catholics became uncomfortable with his papacy. And with the global sexual abuse scandal ravaging the Church and creeping closer and closer to implicating Pope Francis, many of those who supported him initially have begun to distance themselves from his pontificate. This growing discontent from all quarters has led to increasing whispers of a question unheard in centuries: “Is it possible to depose the pope?”

This is not an easy question to answer. If you look at the history of what the Church has taught on this subject as well as the actual record of possible papal depositions, you get a confusing set of often conflicting opinions, actions, and teachings. It will be instructive to review that history in order to address the question seriously.

## To Resign or to be Deposed

Before exploring the history, some definitions are in order. A papal “resignation” means that a pope chooses to leave office and stops practicing his office. Even if he has been pressured to resign, as long as he chooses to step down, it is a “resignation.”

A papal “deposition,” on the other hand, refers to the removal of a pope who does *not* choose to leave office. Rather, an outside body or person removes him from office, and the Church recognizes another man as the legitimate pope. In this case, the “deposed” pope still considers himself pope while the Church does not. An important note: the Church “recognizing” a pope refers to the official Church list of popes, which wasn’t finalized until years after some of the popes in question. Oftentimes in these cases, debate within the Church—including among papal electors—during the time in question rages as to who is the “real pope.” So in these situations it’s a question of a historical looking-back: who does the Church today recognize as the legitimate pope at that time?

To make these definitions clear, let’s posit some hypothetical examples:

- Pope N is tired of being pope and decides of his own free accord to step down. Everyone acknowledges this decision and the Church elects a new pope. Pope N lives out his retirement quietly and makes no claims to be the “real pope.” This is a papal resignation.
- Pope N faces extreme pressure from his enemies to step down. He initially resists, but eventually feels the pressure is too great, so he announces that he is stepping down. The Church elects a new pope, and Pope N makes no claims that he’s the “real pope.” Again, this is a papal resignation.
- Pope N faces extreme pressure from his enemies to step down. One of his enemies is Emperor O, who announces that he is deposing the pope. The emperor, along with his allies in the Church, announces a new pope, Pope P. The Church, however, never officially recognizes Pope P, continuing to recognize Pope N as the legitimate pope. In this case no resignation or deposition happened. Pope P is actually an antipope.
- Pope N faces extreme pressure from his enemies to step down. One of his enemies is Emperor O, who announces that he is deposing the pope. The emperor, along with his allies in the

Church, announces a new pope, Pope P. The Church officially recognizes Pope P, even though Pope N claims to be the “real pope.” This is a papal deposition.

In summary, if a legitimate pope says he’s no longer pope, he’s resigned. But if a legitimate pope claims he’s still pope, but the Church doesn’t recognize him as pope any longer, then he’s been deposed.

Let’s now review what the Church has taught when it comes to papal depositions, then explore the history of how those teachings have been applied in practice.

## Historical Review of Church Teaching

When reviewing Church teaching on any subject, it's important to keep in mind that Catholic teaching develops over time. This does not mean that it fundamentally changes: what was considered true in the 1st century is still true in the 21st. However, the Church's understanding of that truth deepens as she reflects on it. Such a development of understanding is evident regarding the role and authority of the pope.

From the beginning it was recognized that St. Peter had been given authority over the other apostles and the Church in general. This is clear from the Scriptural texts (Matt 16:13-19, Luke 22:31-34, John 21:15-17). This authority was also seen to have been transferred in some sense to his successors as the bishop of Rome.

### *First Millennium*

For the first millennium of the Church's life, however, the exact contours of that authority were being developed and defined. During this time all Christians knew the church in Rome was preeminent above all other local churches, on account of its association with St. Peter (as well as with St. Paul, who was also martyred in Rome). Although later apologists from the East would claim that Rome's authority came from it being the capital of the Empire, that argument was a later attempt to diminish the authority of Rome in comparison to Constantinople, the new imperial capital and the center of the Eastern church.

In the first millennium the governance of the Church was much more decentralized than it is today. Bishops were not appointed by the pope, and regional churches often governed themselves with little or no contact from Rome. It was always, however, considered necessary to be in communion with Rome, as it was the center of the Church. But "communion with" did not always equate to "directly governed by."

In cases of dispute between bishops, it was also the common practice to see Rome as the court of final appeal. No matter the dispute, getting Rome's support was a necessary step in being vindicated. Rome was considered the supreme defender of the faith as handed on by the apostles.



This authority, however, was often attached more to the *church* of Rome, rather than the *person* of the bishop of Rome. It wasn't as clearly recognized that the pope himself was the center of communion or the defender of the faith; instead, *Rome* was that center and defender. So, at least in theory, it was widely assumed that the bishop of Rome could be deposed, and even that the bishop of Rome could be a heretic. Since the focus was on the church of Rome, it was not controversial to believe that the person of the bishop of Rome could be removed in certain situations. However, in the first millennium those situations were never clearly defined and never actually implemented.

### ***Decretum Gratiani (12th Century)***

As the Church entered the second millennium of her life, the teaching on the papacy quickly gained more focus and clarity. With the Gregorian reforms of the papacy in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the power of the pope himself—instead of the generic “church of Rome”—was more explicitly defined.

A primary demonstration of this clarity can be found in the *Decretum Gratiani*, a collection of canon law compiled in the 12th century by the jurist Gratian. Although it wasn't promulgated as formally as modern Codes of Canon Law, it laid out the laws used by the Church until the promulgation of the 1917 Code of Canon Law.

Regarding papal authority, the *Decretum Gratiani* states:

Let no mortal man presume to rebuke [the pope] for his faults, for, it being incumbent upon him to judge all, he should be judged by no one, unless he is suddenly caught deviating from the faith.<sup>1</sup>

The phrase “he should be judged by no one” is an important one, for it will form the basis for later canons related to the authority of the pope. This declaration, of course, makes explicit the implicit use of Rome as the court of final appeal throughout the first millennium. No authority in the Church exists which can judge the pope.

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<sup>1</sup> *Decretum Gratiani*, quoted from <https://remnantnewspaper.com/web/index.php/fetzen-fliegen/item/2917-can-the-church-judge-a-heretical-pope>

However, a very important qualifier is added in the *Decretum Gratiani*: “unless he is suddenly caught deviating from the faith.” What does this mean? This qualifier could be interpreted in a variety of ways, but the most common interpretation is that this is an exception for the case of a heretical pope. Essentially, if the pope were to fall into heresy, then he *could* be judged. Unfortunately the *Decretum Gratiani* does not state exactly who could judge him: a council, the college of Cardinals, or some other group? And more to the point, what could they do if he were judged to be a heretic? Could they also remove him from office? These questions were left unanswered.

Thus, for hundreds of years the Canon Law that was used throughout the Church did hold that a pope could be judged for “deviating from the faith,” though failing to explain exactly who would judge him or what “deviating from the faith” entailed. Many great Catholic scholars shared this position. St. Robert Bellarmine, Tommaso de Vio Gaetani Cajetan, and Francisco Suarez all held to the view that a pope could be judged in certain extreme circumstances, and attempted to explain some of the practical details left out by the *Decretum Gratiani*. It’s important to note, however, that this viewpoint was not universally held, nor were the details of how a heretical pope could be judged. And so the debate remained open.

### ***Decree of Celestine V (1294)***

For a long time, it was also an open question whether a pope could even legitimately resign from his office. As will be shown below, popes stepped down from their office during the first millennium, but some in the Church still wondered if voluntary papal resignations were valid. In 1294, Pope Celestine V, a saintly hermit and compromise candidate in his papal election, issued a decree stating that a pope could resign. A week after he issued the decree, he put this decree into practice by stepping down from the papacy.

His immediate successor, Pope Boniface VIII, confirmed the validity of Celestine’s decree and resignation, which officially put to rest the question of whether a pope could voluntarily resign from office.

## ***Council of Constance (1414-1418)***

During the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Church was reeling from the Great Western Schism, when there were multiple claimants to the papal throne. In response, the Council of Constance was convoked to set a path out of the morass. No one knew for sure who was the “true pope,” so a solution was offered: ecumenical councils were to be deemed of a higher authority than popes, and so they could depose popes and elect new ones. Constance issued the decree *Haec Sancta*, which stated,

This holy synod of Constance...declares in the first place that legitimately convened in the Holy Spirit, forming a general council and representing the militant Catholic Church, it has its powers immediately from Christ, and that each and every one of whatever state or dignity, *even if it be papal*, is bound to obey it in those things which pertain to faith, the rooting out of the schism and the general reform of the Church of God in head and members (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup>

The Council further declared that all subsequent councils would have this same power. Thus, it made clear that councils were *above* the pope and could depose him if necessary. This was the high mark of the movement known as conciliarism, which fought for the power of councils to rule the Church. The popes, however, only accepted *Haec Sancta* by excepting “any prejudice to the rights, dignity and pre-eminence of the Apostolic See.”<sup>3</sup> Because of this, although Constance is one of the twenty-one legitimate ecumenical councils of the Church, *Haec Sancta* itself is now considered heretical and its declarations moot.

## ***Council of Florence (1438-1445)***

Only a few years after Constance, the Church met again in council, this time in Florence. The prime purpose of this council was to reconcile with the Eastern churches, which had been in schism for centuries. The reconciliation was officially formalized, but sadly, it became a dead letter when the churches of the East refused to recognize it. In the debates over what the East needed to accept to be reconciled, the issue of the authority of the pope was raised. Florence declared:

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<sup>2</sup> Council of Constance: *Haec Sancta* (aka *Sacrosancta*), <http://digiHum.mcgill.ca/~matthew.milner/teaching/resources/docs/haecsancta.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Pope Eugenio IV, quoted from <https://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2016/07/haec-sancta-1415-conciliar-document.html>. Follow the link for more details about the lack of reception of this document.

We also define that the holy apostolic see and the Roman pontiff holds the primacy over the whole world and the Roman pontiff is the successor of blessed Peter prince of the apostles, and that he is the true vicar of Christ, the head of the whole church and the father and teacher of all Christians, and to him was committed in blessed Peter the full power of tending, ruling and governing the whole church, as is contained also in the acts of ecumenical councils and in the sacred canons.<sup>4</sup>

While not directly addressing the issue of papal depositions, the language used here—“head of the whole church,” “full power of...ruling”—indicates that the pope is above councils or any other person or body within the Church, and so cannot be judged by them.

### ***First Vatican Council (1869-1870)***

As mentioned, the *Decretum Gratiani* held sway in the Church until the early 20th century, with the promulgation of a new Code of Canon Law. Before that happened, however, another event in the Church touched directly on this subject of judging a pope and potentially deposing him.

The First Vatican Council promulgated teachings related to the authority of the pope. After describing the power of the pope, it concludes,

So, then, if anyone says that the Roman pontiff has merely an office of supervision and guidance, and not the full and supreme power of jurisdiction over the whole church, and this not only in matters of faith and morals, but also in those which concern the discipline and government of the church dispersed throughout the whole world; or that he has only the principal part, but not the absolute fullness, of this supreme power; or that this power of his is not ordinary and immediate both over all and each of the churches and over all and each of the pastors and faithful: let him be anathema.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia, “*Laetentur Caeli*,” [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laetentur\\_Caeli](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laetentur_Caeli)

<sup>5</sup> Decrees of the First Vatican Council, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum20.htm>

Vatican I clearly defines a universal jurisdiction of the pope over the whole Church. It also makes explicit that he has the “absolute fullness of this supreme power.” In other words, no one exists above the pope in the Church, and from this, it seems implicit that no one in the Church can judge him. For who has the authority to judge a person who holds “supreme power?”

Although Vatican I doesn’t directly address the question of papal depositions, this declaration of papal authority appears to severely limit, if not eliminate, the possibility. It’s important however to remember that during this ecumenical council the *Decretum Gratiani* was essentially still in effect. So even with this sweeping and definitive declaration of the pope’s authority, there was still lurking within the Church’s Law the qualifier “unless he is suddenly caught deviating from the faith.”

### ***1917 Code Canon Law (1917)***

In 1903 Pope St. Pius X ordered the creation of a new and definitive Canon Law for the whole Church. It was completed and promulgated by Pope Benedict XV in 1917 and came into effect on Pentecost 1918. It is traditionally referred to as the “Pio-Benedictine Code of 1917” or just the “1917 Code of Canon Law.”

For our purposes, the most important part of the Code is Canon 1556, which states, “The First See is judged by no one.”<sup>6</sup> This language is quite similar to the *Decretum Gratiani*, which stated that the pope “should be judged by no one.” However—and this is a big “however”—no qualifier is added to this canon, no mention of “deviating from the faith” or heresy or any other reason. In effect, the Law of the Church now admitted no exemptions to the supreme authority of the pope, and no way to judge him.

A related canon for our purposes is Canon 221, which states, “If it happens that the Roman Pontiff resigns his office, it is not required for validity that the resignation is accepted by the Cardinals or by anyone else.”<sup>7</sup> This canon confirms Pope Celestine V’s decree that a pope can choose to resign, but it also makes clear that no person or body in the Church is “above” the pope who has to accept his resignation to make it effective.

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<sup>6</sup> 1917 Code of Canon Law, <http://www.jgray.org/codes/cic17lat.html>

<sup>7</sup> 1917 Code of Canon Law, <http://www.jgray.org/codes/cic17lat.html>

### ***1983 Code of Canon Law (1983)***

Only sixty-six years after the Pio-Benedictine Code of 1917, and in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, Pope St. John Paul II promulgated a new Code of Canon Law for the Church. This new Code had many adaptations from the 1917 Code, but for our subject, it was essentially left unchanged.

Canon 1404 of the 1983 Code repeats Canon 1556 of the 1917 Code: “The First See is judged by no one.”<sup>8</sup> Canon 332, however, slightly modifies Canon 221 of the 1917 Code:

If it happens that the Roman Pontiff resigns his office, it is required for validity that the resignation is made freely and properly manifested but not that it is accepted by anyone.<sup>9</sup>

For a papal resignation to be valid, the qualifier is now added, “the resignation is made freely and properly manifested.” This adds an interesting wrinkle to the discussion of papal resignations and depositions, for what does it mean by “made freely?” What if a pope were to publicly resign, but was pressured to do so behind the scenes? Does that make his resignation invalid? The exact contours of what it means to be “made freely” is open to a good deal of interpretation and is not defined by Canon Law. This is not an inconsequential issue, as many papal resignations appear to involve pressure from outside forces.

From this study of the teaching of the Church regarding papal depositions, it seems clear that the teaching has developed, and has clearly developed in the direction *against* deposition. In the first millennium, a papal deposition seemed a legitimate possibility; in the Middle Ages, the idea was restricted to a very precise situation; and in the modern age, no qualifier is given to the pope’s supreme place in the Church. So although it could still be considered an open question, it’s clear where the development has headed.

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<sup>8</sup> Code of Canon Law, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_P5A.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_P5A.HTM)

<sup>9</sup> Code of Canon Law, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_P16.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_P16.HTM)

## Historical Review of Papal Resignations and Possible Depositions

If anything could definitively answer the “open question” it would be an actual papal deposition. If one could find a historical example of a papal deposition, then obviously it is possible and therefore cannot contradict Church teaching. The simple fact that many saints and scholars through the ages have believed a pope could be deposed doesn’t mean he actually can. Saints, scholars, and even Canon Law can make mistakes. None are infallible. A classic example of this is St. Thomas Aquinas’s rejection of the Immaculate Conception. Even though Aquinas is the “Angelic Doctor,” he was wrong on this particular teaching.

So *has* a pope been deposed in the past? Let’s take a look at the historical record.

### ***Early Church***

The first 900 years of the Church’s history provide few cases of a pope leaving office for reasons other than his death. Further, most instances have little substantial evidence detailing what happened. Let’s briefly look at them.

#### *Pontian (230-235)*

In 235 Pope Pontian was exiled to the island of Sardinia. So that a new pope could be elected, he resigned from office. It is the first instance of a papal resignation, and there’s no evidence his resignation was forced or influenced by outside forces.

#### *Marcellinus (296-304)*

Marcellinus was pope from 296-304, during the height of the Diocletian persecution of the Church. Some sources state that Marcellinus offered incense to idols to avoid persecution, and then later repented. Others state that he completely defected from office under the persecution. The *Passio Marcellini*, which was written two hundred years after the pope’s death, further recounts that Marcellinus asked a synod to pass judgement on his actions, but the synod refused on the grounds that it could not judge a pope. What is known is that he died while still acknowledged as pope. While not a confirmed instance of a papal resignation or deposition, this incident was brought up in later debates regarding the judgement of popes.

### *Liberius (352-366)*

In 355 the Emperor Constantius II banished Pope Liberius for refusing to join in the condemnation of St. Athanasius. Then antipope Felix II was installed, and he “reigned” until his death in 365. However, Liberius returned to Rome in 357, which forced Felix out of the Eternal City. Some scholars have posited that Liberius himself resigned in 365 (perhaps due to confusion with the end of Felix’s “reign” in 365), but no proof of this exists, and most historians consider it unlikely.

### *Martin I (649-655)*

In 653 Pope Martin I was exiled and imprisoned on the island of Cherson by Emperor Constans II. He remained there until his death in 655. However, before his death, in 654, Eugene I was elected pope. No record exists of Martin resigning or being deposed, yet the Church recognizes Eugene as the legitimate pope starting with his election in 654, not with Martin’s death in 655.

(Note: although infamous, the cases of Pope Honorius and Pope Formosus are not relevant to this discussion. Both were condemned after their deaths, and at no time during their reign did they resign or were they deposed.)

## ***Saeculum Obscurum***

Universally acknowledged as the nadir of the papacy, the *saeculum obscurum* or “Dark Age” of the papacy occurred during the first half of the 10th century. During this time the papacy was essentially a puppet of a corrupt local aristocratic family, the Theophylacti. Further, it was during the *saeculum obscurum* that a number of popes left office under a cloud of suspicion.

### *John X (914-928)*

John X, like all the popes of the *saeculum obscurum*, was highly connected with, and influenced by, the Theophylacti family. Rumors even swirled that he was the lover of Theodora, the wife of the most powerful member of that family. As was typical of the time, he was involved mostly in political intrigues rather than spiritual matters. Eventually his enemies captured him and threw him in a dungeon, where he eventually died. Some have claimed that he was deposed while imprisoned, but there is no convincing evidence for this, and his successor, Pope Leo VI, did not begin his reign until after John’s death.



### *John XII (955-964)*

Elected pope near the end of the *saeculum obscurum*, John XII is known to history as a corrupt and depraved pontiff. In 961, John crowned Otto, King of Germany, as the Roman Emperor. However, their relationship soon turned sour. Otto wanted John to renounce his immoral lifestyle and clean up the papal court. John did nothing to change, and so Otto called a council which deposed John as pope and elected Leo VIII as the new pope. After Otto left Rome, however, John returned, rallied the Roman people to his cause, chased Leo VIII out of the city, and then called a synod to invalidate Otto's synod. He remained ruler of Rome until his death in May 964 (which occurred during an adulterous affair). In the Church's official reckoning of popes, John XII never left the office of the papacy, and Leo VIII's brief reign was as antipope.

### *Benedict V (964)*

After John XII's death, Pope Benedict V was elected pope over the objections of Otto. Only a month into his papacy Otto's forces attacked Rome and captured Benedict. He was accused of usurping the Chair of St. Peter from the man whom they considered the rightful occupant (Leo VIII). After being promised his life would be spared, Benedict acknowledged his guilt before Leo and abdicated.

Benedict was stripped of his pallium and his consecration as bishop was revoked. He was exiled from Rome, and he lived for another year before dying in 965. However, during this time of exile, the Church recognizes his successor, Leo VIII, as the rightful pope (thus making Leo VIII both a pope *and* an antipope). This raises the question: is this a case of a legitimate papal deposition?

One could look at it in two ways: Either Benedict resigned—under pressure—by accepting the decision of Otto, or he was forcibly deposed by the Emperor. No evidence exists that Benedict challenged his abdication after his exile. Further, Leo died before Benedict, and there's no record of Benedict challenging the election of John XIII to succeed Leo. But there's not enough information about Benedict's decision to say for sure if this was a pressured resignation or a true forced deposition.

## ***Middle Ages***

### *John XVIII (1004-1009)*

John XVIII became pope during a time when the papal elections were still controlled by warring aristocratic Roman families. After five years in office, he abdicated his position and became a monk.

Unfortunately, no details of the reason or circumstances regarding his resignation have been handed down.

*Benedict IX (1032-1044, 1045, 1047-1048)*

Pope Benedict IX surely must be considered a contender for Worst Pope in History. The Catholic Encyclopedia called him a “disgrace to the Chair of Peter.”<sup>10</sup> He is the only man to hold the office of the papacy on multiple occasions. He left the papal office not once, not twice, but three times!

Benedict was first elected pope at a young age, likely through bribery by his father. He initially reigned for twelve years (the longest of his three reigns). However, in 1044, the people of Rome tired of his dissolute behavior and he was driven out of the city. Soon after Sylvester III was elected as the new pope. A few months later Benedict returned and expelled Sylvester. The details of Sylvester’s expulsion are unknown, but after his expulsion he returned to the city of Sabina and took up the office of bishop (he had been bishop there previous to being elected pope). The Church recognizes Sylvester’s brief papal reign as legitimate, and also recognizes his post-papal reign as the bishop of Sabina. After Sylvester left Rome, Benedict’s second reign as pope was short-lived: he decided to abdicate the Chair of St. Peter, selling the office to Gregory VI.

Soon afterwards, the fickle Benedict changed his mind again. He declared himself pope once more, even though Gregory was still reigning as pope. Eventually King Henry of Germany intervened and removed Benedict, Gregory, and Sylvester (who was still alive), after which Clement II was elected pope (who in return crowned Henry as the Holy Roman Emperor).

When Clement died in 1047, Benedict returned and forcibly seized Lateran Palace and reigned for less than a year. He was then driven away from Rome by German troops, and Damasus II was elected pope. Benedict lived for another seven or eight years in obscurity.

Ultimately, the Church recognized three legitimate and distinct reigns for this contemptible man:

- *Benedict IX (1<sup>st</sup> reign): October 1032 – December 1044*
- *Sylvester III: January 1045 – March 1045*
- *Benedict IX (2<sup>nd</sup> reign): March – May 1045*

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<sup>10</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia, “Pope Benedict IX,” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02429a.htm>

- Gregory VI: May 1045 – December 1046
- Clement II: December 1046 – October 1047
- *Benedict IX (3<sup>rd</sup> reign): November 1047 – July 1048*

It's difficult centuries later to untangle this complex historical mess, but it seems quite possible that Benedict did not resign, but was deposed from the papacy, at least in the first instance of his removal from office in 1044. It's also possible that Sylvester's ouster was a deposition, although it appears he accepted being bishop of his former hometown after he left Rome. Benedict's capricious nature and the complexities of contemporary Roman politics make it impossible to say anything for certain, however.

#### *Celestine V (1294)*

In 1292, Pope Nicholas IV died, leaving the Chair of St. Peter vacant. For two years papal electors debated and fought over his successor to no avail. Finally, as a compromise they picked Celestine V, a humble Benedictine hermit, in the last non-conclave papal election. It wasn't very long before everyone—including Celestine himself—realized this was a mistake. His talents were more suited to the hermitage than the Vatican. As already mentioned, after just five months in office he issued a decree declaring that popes have the right to resign, and then a week later he himself resigned from the papal office. No one disputes that this was a voluntary resignation.

### ***Great Western Schism***

There has been no greater crisis for the authority of the papacy than the Great Western Schism, when multiple men, backed by powerful factions, claimed occupancy of the Chair of St. Peter. It left Catholics divided and confused, and greatly decreased the influence of the papacy in the medieval world. It also led to numerous claimants' resignations and possible depositions.

#### *Gregory XII (1406-1415)*

The Great Western Schism came about due to the Avignon Captivity of the papacy, during which popes reigned from Avignon, France instead of from Rome. In 1378, after almost 70 years of French popes based in Avignon, the college of Cardinals elected an Italian—Urban VI—who moved the papacy back to Rome. Soon, however, French Cardinals elected an antipope who reigned from

Avignon. Although today it's clear who was the “real pope,” at the time many powerful forces supported each claimant and it was difficult for Catholics to know whom to follow.

This schism lasted for almost forty years, and during this time groups of Cardinals made numerous attempts to re-unite the Church under one pope, including at the Council of Pisa in 1409. During this time the Roman pope was Gregory XII and the Avignon pope was Benedict XIII. The college of Cardinals, comprising members with allegiance to each pope, called the council with a plan to depose both “popes” and elect a new, single, pope. Both popes were declared heretics, which might seem a bit strange, but was necessary since heresy, according to the *Decretum Gratiani*, was the only way a pope could be deposed. After deposing the two popes, the council then elected Alexander V as pope.

Instead of improving the situation, however, this just made things worse. Neither Gregory XII nor Benedict XIII accepted his deposition, and so now instead of two claimants to the papacy, there were three, in Rome, Avignon, and Pisa.

Alexander soon died, but John XXIII was elected in his stead, maintaining the situation of three competing popes. In 1414 another council was called, this time in Constance. Instead of condemning the various popes as heretics, this council tried to end the Schism diplomatically by asking all the rival claimants to resign voluntarily.

Of the three claimants, only Gregory XII, of the “Roman” line, voluntarily resigned, doing so in 1415. Both Benedict XIII and John XXIII refused. John was arrested and deposed, and although Benedict stayed in office in Avignon until his death in 1423, he was marginalized by most of the Church. For the next two years after Gregory resigned the Council of Constance in essence ruled the Church until it elected Martin V as pope, effectively ending the Schism.

Although there were a confusing mix of papal claimants, the Church only recognizes the Roman line as legitimate. Thus, Gregory XII was the true pope. He was deposed by the Council of Pisa in 1409, but rejected that deposition and Pisa's decision is now considered invalid. His abdication in 1415, done in response to the Council of Constance's request, is seen as a voluntary resignation for the good of the Church, instead of a deposition.

### *Eugene IV (1431-1447)*

Although the Great Western Schism is officially considered to have ended with the elevation of Martin V, it had a lingering impact on the Church. A Council held in Basil in the 1430's fell into conflict with Pope Eugene IV. The question revolved around the issue that was raised by the Schism and was addressed at Constance: is the pope or the council the supreme authority in the Church? Many council fathers believed it was the council, not the pope. Eugene decided to dissolve the council and transfer it to Ferrara (and later to Florence). However, many participants remained in Basil and continued the council without him. They deposed Eugene as a "heretic" and elected Felix V as pope. This schism lasted only a decade, and eventually its adherents were reconciled to the Church. Eugene's deposition was never considered valid by the larger Church, and Felix V is considered an antipope.

### ***Modern Times***

From Felix V to the present the Church has not endured any further significant antipopes, and there have been no more serious attempts to remove a pope from office. Further, after Gregory XII's resignation in 1414, no pope abdicated from the Chair of St. Peter until the 21st century. It was an era of peace and stability in the papacy.

### *Benedict XVI (2005-2013)*

In 2013, Pope Benedict shocked the world by declaring he would be the first pope to resign in almost 600 years. In his resignation announcement he made clear that he was making the decision of his own free will, in accord with the 1983 Code of Canon Law's stipulation that a pope's resignation must be "made freely and properly manifested." Most people today accept his resignation as voluntary and legitimate, although some believe significant pressures within the Vatican forced his hand, thus calling into question its voluntary nature. History will view his resignation as a freely-made choice in all likelihood.

Thus, in almost 2,000 years there have been 264 men who have been pope, and numerous men who unsuccessfully tried to claim the Chair of St. Peter. In that time, only a dozen or so have left the papacy for a reason other than death. In most of those cases, the resignations were likely voluntary, even if at times outside pressure was involved in the decision. However, in a handful of cases coercion may have been involved, and even a forced deposition. In the two cases in which it is most likely that a papal deposition *might* have happened—Benedict V and especially Benedict IX—it's noteworthy that neither

of these popes were removed for heresy, which is supposedly, according to *Decretum Gratiani*, the only reason a pope can be deposed. Thus, the historical record isn't clearcut on the issue of papal depositions.

## Answering the Question

So can popes be deposed? Based on this review of the history of Church teaching as well as instances of papal resignations and “depositions,” it is my personal conclusion that popes *cannot* be deposed. I base this conclusion on three factors: (1) the obvious trajectory of Church teaching in this regard; (2) the lack of clear evidence of an actual papal deposition in the past; and (3) the *de fide* teaching of Vatican I (and the Council of Florence) regarding the supreme authority of the pope.

However, I freely acknowledge that the case is not air-tight. One could easily argue that a “trajectory” of teaching isn’t the same as a “definitive” teaching, and as I’ve admitted, Canon Law, which currently has no room for a papal deposition, isn’t infallible. Also, one could interpret the historical evidence of papal “depositions” differently than I have, and even if no pope has ever been deposed, it doesn’t prove that one *can’t* be deposed. Finally, the teaching of Vatican I, while infallible and related to papal authority, does not directly address the issue of papal depositions.

Earlier in this essay I noted regarding papal depositions, “This is not an easy question to answer. If you look at the history of what the Church has taught on this subject as well as the actual record of possible papal depositions, you get a confusing set of often conflicting opinions, actions, and teachings.” Even though my conclusion is that papal depositions are not possible, I cannot but recognize that this is but one more opinion in “confusing set of often conflicting opinions, actions, and teachings.” Let us all pray to the Holy Spirit that clarity in this area might be granted, but, even more importantly, that it will never be necessary to put it into practice.