

## Canons

The etymological meaning of canon is 'included in the list or "canon" of a church. This is the definition used by the councils of Antioch (332), Chalcedon (451), Trullo (692) to refer to the clerics who are on the canon or register of a church. In the West the term 'canon' refers to those clerics attached to a cathedral or a collegiate or a parish church who receive, in return for their service, from the revenues of that church, prebends - income in kind or cash. Towards the end of the sixth century the word canon took on a precise sense, referring to the clerics who lived a common life with the bishop in the vicinity of the cathedral, or under an ecclesiastical superior in the case of collegiate churches or parishes served by members of a community. Already in the fourth century St Eusebius of Vercelli had imposed on his clergy a form of life very similar to the common life led by the monks who lived together with St Augustine at Hippo – an institution which was swept away by the Vandal invasions. Towards 751 St Chrodegang, bishop of Metz, composed a rule for the members of his clergy who lived a common life with him. This enjoyed a certain success and soon many churches adopted it. It should be noted that care was taken to distinguish canons from nuns, according to the evidence of the council of Tours in 813. Beside the community of clerics serving the cathedral and that of monks under the rule of St Benedict, there were also monasteries 'in which the canonical way of life was followed of old, or now appears to be followed', under an abbot's authority. In 816 the council of Aachen promulgated a new rule for canons, recognizing that the community of canons had the right to hold property. Bishops and lay lords then conferred on them properties which were the first endowments to support the common table of the canons.

From this period the portion assigned to a canon in the distribution acquired the name 'prebend'. From the end of the ninth century until the mid eleventh century there were many who denounced the combination of the common life with the demands of the pastoral ministry as incompatible. This resulted in a steep decline in the standard of communal life, with every canon feeling free to administer his patrimonial goods as he saw fit. It was at the Roman Council of 1059 that the key to a true reform was found, namely, to make the renunciation of personal property, inherited goods included, a reality, and to live a common life according to the model of the canons of Rome, who set an example in this regard. The mind behind this reform was the monk Hildebrand, who was elected pope in 1073, with the name Gregory VII. He asked all canons to offer their goods to the Church. Those who refused could nonetheless continue their previous way of life. Two already existing ways of understanding the life of canons become more clearly defined: on the one hand, the 'new order', composed of regular canons, and on the other the 'ancient order', corresponding to 'secular canons'.

### *Titular canons*

According to the 1917 Codex of Canon Law, titular canons are nominated by the diocesan bishop alone, after he has listened to the views of the chapter, taking account of the

candidates' training in theology etc and of the merits demonstrated in their exercise of the ministry. In some cases the Holy See has allowed a certain right of presentation by the chapter to continue. Canons should be distinguished by their doctrinal knowledge and the integrity of their way of life. They have an obligation to make a profession of faith and to take possession of their stall in the choir. They therefore enjoy special marks of distinction and privileges, they have a right to the income of the benefice, and they are also influential voices in the deliberations of the chapter. Since the Council of Trent, especially, they are bound to reside in the place where they hold a benefice, unless they receive a dispensation. They are in fact obliged to come together as a group for the divine office and the celebration of the chapter mass, and to assist the bishop when he celebrates or presides. The 1983 Code of Canon Law reserves solemn liturgical functions in cathedrals or collegiate churches to canons. All other prerogatives have been devolved to the college of consultors and the the council of priests, unless the bishop decides otherwise. The canon penitentiary of a cathedral or of a collegiate church still retains as part of his office the power to absolve from automatic excommunications which have not been publicly promulgated and which are not cases reserved to the Holy See.

#### *Other categories of canons*

After taking part in the divine office for forty continuous years in the same diocese, canons can obtain from the Holy See an emeritus exemption, also called a jubilee exemption, which allows them to receive the income of their prebend and the provisions in kind attached to it without being obliged to attend the divine service in the cathedral or to reside.

#### *Supernumery canons*

In chapters which did not in the past have a fixed number of canons, some canons did not possess a prebend and had no claim on one. The 1917 Code of Canon Law, by forbidding the creation of canonries without a prebend or equivalent resources, has sanctioned the elimination of supernumery canons.

#### *Canons in waiting*

In the past there were canons with a place in the choir and the right to speak in the chapter while they waited for a prebend to become vacant. Expectative canonries, already condemned at the 1179 Lateran Council (Decree 1. III, tit. VIII, c. 2) were formally forbidden at the Council of Trent.

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