

Catholics without popes

By [Julie Byrne](#)

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On February 11, comedian Stephen Colbert [asked historian Garry Wills](#) if he was in favor of the next pope being not John Paul III or Benedict XVII but “Nobody the First.” Wills smiled and said, “Ah, very good idea.”

For some Catholics, this idea is more than a joke. For them, the question is not who should be the next pope. It’s whether there is or should be a pope at all.

With the retirement of Benedict XVI, the seat of Peter is empty—*sede vacante*. But for Catholics past and present, the papacy is only one possible center of faith. A wider look at Catholic history—wider than media obsessions during the conclave—shows that the pope’s centrality has long been a highly contested topic.

Official papal theology *about itself* has long put the pope at the center.

As the 16th-century Protestant Reformation and the 18th-century French Revolution unfolded, popes theorized that the strongest church was the most centralized church. Protestant denominations proliferated, and ancient monarchies toppled. But if one pope stood above all nation-states, Roman Catholicism would thrive.

The 1870-71 council of Vatican I made papal infallibility a doctrine, but voting was a hotly contested matter:

- A straw poll showed that approximately 10 percent of the bishops opposed papal infallibility.
- Before the final vote, about 60 prelates left Rome rather than defy the Vatican.

Not all local priests and parishes were ready to give in. In Germany and Austria, a new body arose called the Old Catholic Church. It patterned itself on another

Catholicism—eastern Orthodoxy—and established leadership by a council of bishops. Almost immediately it celebrated mass in the vernacular. Within several decades, its priests could marry.

Eminent Catholic theologian Hans Küng—who recently hoped in the pages of the *New York Times* for a [“Vatican Spring”](#)—[writes](#) that Old Catholicism “continues to be Catholic but is Rome-free.” Doctrinally ancient but also modern, Küng says, “this little bold and ecumenically open Old Catholic Church from the beginning anticipated reforms of the Second Vatican Council.”

Today, [Old Catholicism](#) has churches in ten countries from the Netherlands to Croatia. It ordains women and is in communion with Anglicanism.

Old Catholicism has also generated several hundred small independent Catholic churches in the U.S., including the historic Polish National Catholic Church and the African Orthodox Church. Some, such as the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, the Church of Antioch and Ascension Alliance, open the sacraments to all comers, including marriage and ordination. The list also includes formerly Roman parishes, such as St. Stanislaus Kostka in St. Louis and Spiritus Christi in Rochester, New York.

But even among those who stayed with Rome, there exist hugely differing views on the papacy. These Catholics take sides not on Vatican I but on Vatican II, the 1960s council that gave the church a modern makeover.

On the strong right of the U.S. church are opponents of Vatican II, who say the council’s documents are so out of step with tradition that its leadership must have been hijacked. John XXIII, the convener of Vatican II, was no true pope. Starting with him, the Roman popes have been impostors.

On the strong left are progressive Roman Catholics like Wills, whose pursuit of “the spirit of Vatican II” goes so far as to question the need for priests and popes at all.

The disagreements expose a wide and diverse Catholicism, in which overall affirmation of Vatican authority has declined. According to one recent [survey](#) fewer than three out of ten U.S. Roman Catholics says that the “teaching authority claimed by the Vatican” is “very important” to them.

U.S. Roman Catholicism is now fully one-third Latino, and this is another group that does not simply accede to papal centrality.

The vitality of devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the mother of Jesus manifested at Guadalupe, often far surpasses concerns for the pope. Especially among Mexican-Americans, who make up more than 60 percent of U.S. Hispanics, she is the living center of faith. Only half jokingly, some Latino Catholics say they are not Romans, but Guadalupeans. Among Guadalupeans, this beloved [Mary](#) with brown skin and a golden aura wins any popularity contest with the pope.

The election of the next pope is a fascinating spectacle on Vatican Hill. But if we look closely, the roil of Catholic opinion on the ground is the real show.

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