

V.3.b The
PapacyTrials in the Papal Office

We will not attempt to put together all the complexities of the Roman church at this time but in the consideration of the growth of the life of the western church the most basic trials in Rome are important.

Difficulties in Papal elections

The term "pope" is most common in the western church from the 9th century on. The method of selecting the pope was, however, complicated. Originally the selection had been by a voice vote of a conclave: all the persons who were in the diocese or district. This led to great clamorings and packing the house in favor of special delegates, etc. In the 8th century a new policy was adopted (769) that was intended to keep the papal election out of the public arena. The clergy of the city began electing the new bishop. This saved a big public display but it also brought personal political power into a more viable role and pressure politics would be applied to the local priests to vote for the right man. Eventually only the pastors of the churches (the cardinals) will have the voting right but this will come later. Word was out, however, that whoever could buy enough of the clergy could buy the election.

Papal confusion in the 9th century

Within 100 years of the election change, the papacy became overwhelmed with unworthy persons. John VIII was elected in 872 and promptly assassinated. His successors were greedy opportunists and the peak was found in the career of Formossus (891-896), an unlikely spiritual leader who 13 years earlier had been banned from Rome. As pope, Formossus favored Lambert for the protector of the Roman states and then gave the official job to Arnulf, Lambert's foe and rival. Formossus died before Lambert could kill him and his successor, Stephen VII, had the corpse disinterred, dressed in papal clothes, tried, condemned, deposed, mutilated, and thrown into the Tiber! Pulled out by a monk, the late pope's body was buried, later he was given a clean bill of health and buried again in sacred ground. Stephen VII himself was murdered in 897...it was not a good time to be pope and this grisly tale could be augmented by many similar stories.