



What is a cardinal's role in the Catholic Church?

CATHOLICS AND NON-CATHOLICS IN THE TORONTO metropolitan area take pride in the fact that our archbishop, Frank Leo, is not simply an archbishop but also a cardinal of the Holy Roman Church. He is one of 223 members of the Sacred College of Cardinals. Their best-known duty – reserved to cardinals under the age of 80 – is to elect a new pope whenever a reigning pontiff dies or resigns. That however, is not their only responsibility.

According to the Code of Canon Law (Canon 349), “The Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church constitute a special College, whose prerogative it is to elect the Roman Pontiff... The Cardinals are also available to the Roman Pontiff, either acting collegially, when they are summoned together to deal with questions of major importance, or acting individually, that is in the offices which they hold in assisting the Roman Pontiff especially in the daily care of the universal church.” Cardinals are thus the close collaborators of the pope, assisting him with their advice and counsel. Some of them work in the Roman Curia as the pope’s direct deputies.

The pope alone selects bishops and priests to become cardinals: “Those to be promoted Cardinals are men freely selected by the Roman Pontiff, who are at least in the order of priesthood and are truly outstanding in doctrine, virtue, piety and prudence in practical matters” (Canon 315). Technically, a priest must be consecrated as a bishop before becoming a cardinal, but the pope has the option to dispense with this requirement.

According to Canon 356, “Cardinals have the obligation of cooperating closely with the Roman Pontiff.” Thus the heads of the various departments of the Holy See, known as dicasteries, are named cardinals, as are a select number of bishops throughout the world. Typically, the bishops of important and large cities are chosen to become cardinals. Frank Cardinal Leo will become only the fourth Cardinal of Toronto.

The most momentous duty of a cardinal is to vote for the new pope at the conclave held in the Sistine Chapel. This requires that he be attentive to the needs of the church at that particular moment in time, familiar with the qualities and gifts of his fellow cardinals (since one of them will almost certainly be selected pope), and open to the motions of the Holy Spirit for guidance in casting his vote. Before entering the conclave, voting and non-voting cardinals (those over 80 years old) meet to discuss the needs of the church. Once the conclave has begun, the voting cardinals pray, meet and vote until they have chosen the next pope. Canon law does not obligate the cardinals to pick one of their own to become pope, but centuries of historical precedent all but ensure that they will do so.

The cardinals of the Church have an awesome responsibility in electing the pope, and then advising and assisting him as he leads the flock of Christ and preaches the Gospel of salvation to the world. Let us keep them in our daily prayers, along with Christ’s vicar on earth, the pope.

