

The first [Christian](#) communities were founded in cities and the entire Divine service was carried on by the [bishop](#) and his [clergy](#); the few faithful outside the cities went to the city or were visited from time to time by

[clerics](#)

from the presbyteries. In the fourth century we find in the villages groups sufficiently large to be served by a resident

[clergy](#)

. Canon 77 of Elvira (about A.D. 300) speaks of a

[deacon](#)

in charge of the people (

diaconus regens plebem

). In the East at a very early period the churches of the cities and of the country districts were organized; the Council of Neocæsarea, about 320 (can. 13), speaks of country

[priests](#)

and

[bishops](#)

of villages, the "chorepiscopi", who had a subordinate

[clergy](#)

. Such churches and their

[clergy](#)

were originally under the direct administration of the

[bishop](#)

; but soon they had their own resources and a distinct administration (

[Council of Chalcedon](#)

, 451, can. 4, 6, 17). The same change took place in the West, but more slowly. In proportion as the country districts were evangelized (fourth to sixth centuries), churches were erected, at first in the vici (hamlets or villages), afterwards on church lands or on the

[property](#)

of private

[individuals](#)

, and at least one

[priest](#)

was appointed to each church. The

[clergy](#)

and

[property](#)

depended at first directly on the

[bishop](#)

and the

[cathedral](#)

; the churches did not yet correspond to very definite territorial circumscriptions: the centre was better marked than the boundaries. Such was the church which the councils of the sixth and seventh century call

ecclesia rusticana

,
parochitana
, often
dioecesis
, and finally
parochia
. By that time most of these churches had become independent: the
[priest](#)
administered the
[property](#)
assigned to him by the
[bishop](#)
, and also the
[property](#)
given directly to the church by the
[pious](#)
faithful; from that moment the
[priest](#)
became a beneficiary and had his title. More plentiful resources required and permitted a
more numerous
[clergy](#)
. The devotion of the
[faithful](#)
, especially towards
[relics](#)
, led to the erection of numerous secondary
[chapels](#)
,
oratoria, basilicæ, martyria
, which also had their
[clergy](#)
. But these
tituli minores
were not parishes; they depended on the principal church of the
vicus
, and on the
[archpriest](#)
so often mentioned in the councils of the sixth and seventh centuries, who had authority over
his own
[clergy](#)
and those of the
[oratories](#)
.

These secondary churches emphasize the parochial character of the [baptismal](#) churches,
as the faithful had to receive the

[sacraments](#)

and pay their

[tithes](#)

in the latter. The

[monasteries](#)

in turn ministered to the people grouped around them. From the eighth century parochial centres multiplied on the lands of the churches and the

[monasteries](#)

, and the

villæ

or great estates of the kings and nobles. Then the

villæ

were subdivided and the parish served a certain number of

villæ

or rural districts, and thus the parish church became the centre of the religious and even the civil life of the villages. This condition, established in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, has scarcely varied since, as far as concerns the parochial service. As

[benefices](#)

, however, parishes have undergone many vicissitudes, owing to their union with

[monasteries](#)

or chapters, and on account of the inextricable complications of the

[feudal](#)

order. Parish churches had ordinarily attached to them

[schools](#)

and charitable works, especially for the poor enrolled on the

[matricula](#)

, or list of those attached to the

[Church](#)

. In the episcopal and other cities the division into parishes took place much more slowly, the

[cathedral](#)

or the archipresbyteral church being for a long time the only parochial church. However, numerous the city churches, all depended on it and, properly speaking, had no flock of their own. At

[Rome](#)

, as early as the fourth century, there was a quasi-parochial service in the "titles" and cemeterial churches (Innocent I to Decentius, c. 5, an. 416). It is only towards the close of the eleventh century that separate urban parishes began; even then there were limitations, e.g.

[baptism](#)

was to be conferred in the

[cathedral](#)

; the territories, moreover, were badly defined. The chapters turned over to the

[clergy](#)

of the churches the parochial ministry, while the corporations (guilds) insisted especially on the granting of parochial

[rights](#)

to the churches which they founded and supported.

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