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SPECIAL ISSUE

How a New Pope Is Chosen

THE TIME-HONORED TRADITIONS
OF PAPAL ELECTIONS

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About 2,000 years ago, Jesus told Peter he was the rock on which Jesus would build his Church and instructed Peter to tend his sheep. Since Peter, the Catholic Church has been led by more than 260 men we call *pope*. How were these men selected? How will the next pope be chosen? How has the papal election process changed over time? This special issue of *Catholic Update* walks the reader through the various rituals involved in the resignation or death and burial of a pope and the process of electing a new one.



The process of electing a pope has developed over centuries. Today's procedures began to take shape in the Middle Ages, as the cardinals became the pope's most trusted advisors. Later popes refined the process, most recently through *On Electing the Roman Pontiff (Romano Pontifici Eligendo)*, issued by Paul VI in 1975, and *Of the Lord's Whole Flock (Universi Dominici Gregis)*, issued by John Paul II in 1996. In 2013, because of his rare and surprising resignation, Benedict XVI changed the process slightly.

The rules for selecting a pope are the same whether a pope dies or resigns, although, surprisingly, there are no procedures for what to do if a pope is physically or mentally incapacitated in a catastrophic manner and cannot function. Unlike the United States Constitution's 25th Amendment, which provides for the removal of an American president, there are no such procedures in canon law. Recent popes have written letters saying they would *de facto* resign if they were in such circumstances, but there are many unresolved questions as to who would determine when the letter should be applied and what steps would be taken next.

The Death of a Pope

When a pope dies, there is a formal process to certify his death, carry out his funeral, and ensure that the

selection of his successor takes place according to the prescribed procedures. The busiest person during this period is the cardinal who serves as the camerlengo, or papal chamberlain.

The camerlengo's first task is to certify that the pope is dead. Historically, this included tapping the pope's forehead, perhaps with a small silver hammer, and calling him three times by his first name. No response meant the pope was dead. More precise medical equipment is used today. The pope's rooms and desk are then locked, communications lines are cut, and the apartment doors are sealed by red ribbons that won't be taken down until the next pope is elected.

Interregnum

The time between the death or resignation of one pope and the election of the next is called the *interregnum*, "between the reigns." The cardinals gather in Rome to follow the instructions for arranging the conclave—the assembly of cardinals to elect the next pope. The cardinals act only as caretakers for the Church. They cannot take any action reserved for the pope alone, such as naming bishops or calling a general council.

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After swearing to follow these guidelines, the cardinals decide how the pope's body will be available for public viewing, when the funeral will take place, and other details, following directions left by the dead pope. Between four and six days after he dies, the pope is buried along with his broken ring, seal, and copies of his most important statements and decisions. Then, a nine-day period of mourning called the *novemdiales* begins.

Conclave

The most significant event of the interregnum is the conclave, in which the cardinals select the new pope. The cardinals decide when the conclave will start, but the rules state that it must be no more than twenty days after the interregnum begins, though Benedict XVI declared that it can be less than fifteen days if all eligible cardinals are ready to go. Either way, this means the Vatican staff has less than three weeks to get ready.

The process by which the cardinals acquired the exclusive right to elect the pope is only half as old as the Church. The former process allowed other clerics to participate and for the sitting pope to let his choice for successor be known, though that was not binding. In 1059, Nicholas II gave cardinals the leading role in electing popes—in part to keep feuding Romans from making the office more political than spiritual.



Then, the Third Lateran Council (1179) restricted election to the cardinals and established that a man would be pope when two-thirds of the College of Cardinals agreed on the candidate. This removed the prior requirement of a unanimous vote.

But electing a new pope still wasn't always straightforward. For nearly three years after Clement IV died in 1268, there was no pope. Finally, officials in Viterbo, Italy, where the cardinals were meeting, got tired of waiting. They locked the cardinals in a building, tore the roof off to expose them to the elements, and threatened to feed them only bread and water. Gregory X was elected almost immediately. (The six-month conclave of 1740 was the last long one. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, conclaves have lasted less than a week, sometimes just a day or two.)

The Second Council of Lyons (1274) ushered in medieval developments in electing the pope; these processes remained in place until the modern period. Gregory X—probably seeking to avoid the turmoil of his own election—stipulated that the cardinals should gather in the city where the pope, who often traveled throughout Europe, died. The cardinals were to be locked in with a key to avoid outside influence. In Latin, “with a key” translates to *cum clave* and is the origin of the English word *conclave*.

Pope Gregory XV instituted three changes in 1621: a secret ballot in place of a voice or hand vote, writing down only one name at a time instead of a list, and voting twice a day instead of once. Today, the cardinals elect the pope in Rome, even if the previous pope dies elsewhere. The last time an election took place outside Rome was in 1800, when the cardinals elected Pius VII in Venice.

The number of cardinal electors at the conclave is set at a maximum of 120, even though there may be more cardinals. Paul VI stipulated that only cardinals who have not reached their eightieth birthday before the date of the conclave may enter, but those older than eighty may participate in preliminary meetings. Despite this rule, several recent popes have had more than 120

eligible electors at any one time, but this number fluctuates as cardinals turn eighty and lose their vote.

The recent norm has been about 110–120 electors, which is a substantial increase over the elections of John XXIII (fifty-one electors in 1958) and Paul VI (eighty in 1963). Some past elections have included fewer than two dozen cardinals.

In Secret

For much of Church history, conclaves were full of leaks. Since the 1800s, every attempt has been made to keep the proceedings secret. Today, after the cardinals celebrate a special Mass for electing the pope on the morning of the conclave's first day, they file into the Sistine Chapel as electronic sweeps search for bugs. Searches before the 1922 conclave revealed a hidden photographer and a reporter masquerading as a waiter.

In the past, each cardinal was allowed to bring in a secretary, a doctor, and even a cook, but today few people other than the cardinals are present. There are a few technicians, medical personnel, and secretarial, legal, and liturgical assistants. Everyone takes an oath to keep what they see and hear secret forever unless specifically permitted to talk by the pope. The cardinals also take several oaths concerning permanent secrecy. Benedict XVI strengthened the punishment for breaking the oath of secrecy from “grave penalties” to excommunication.

After the search for bugs is complete, a cry of “*Extra omnes!*” (“Everybody else out!”) is heard. The conclave doors are locked inside and out with keys and sealed.

The cardinals are then on their own. Like a sequestered jury, they are under strict orders not to communicate with anyone and to ignore attempts to contact them while they move between buildings. They can't read newspapers, magazines, or letters; they cannot use telephones; and they cannot listen to the radio or watch TV.

Changes Made by Pope Saint John Paul II

John Paul II made two major changes. The first concerns the living arrangements of the cardinals during the conclave and was the logical way to address a larger group of cardinals. For centuries, all in attendance were crowded into makeshift bedrooms in the Vatican. Huge apartments and public salons with priceless art were curtained off into cubicles, each containing a spare bed, writing table, crucifix, and kneeler.

However, John Paul II's election in 1978 was the last to require spartan quarters. Now, the cardinals live in a simple building nearby, the *Domus Sanctae Marthae* (St. Martha's House), from which they shuttle to and from the Sistine Chapel. Despite this change in accommodations, the stress on secrecy remains.

The method of election is a second major change made by John Paul II. For centuries, popes were elected according to three procedures: acclamation, delegation, and voting. Acclamation required all the electors to unanimously voice their support for a particular man. Gregory XV abolished acclamation in 1621, but apparently it had remained an option. In delegation, the cardinals chose a small group from among themselves to make a binding decision for the rest. John Paul II prohibited both acclamation and delegation, leaving voting as the sole means of election.

Voting

Once everyone has been cleared out of the conclave and the doors locked, voting begins. Only one ballot is taken on the evening of the first busy day.

Voting follows a strict procedure and is the only activity that takes place after the doors are locked. There are no speeches. The cardinals gather twice a day, and each session has two ballots. This means they vote twice in the morning, stop for a meal, and then vote twice in the afternoon. For each session, each cardinal is given rectangular paper ballots on which are printed the Latin words *Eligo in Summum Pontificem* (I elect as Supreme Pontiff). He writes the

name of his candidate but disguises his handwriting, then he folds the paper twice.

Each cardinal approaches the Sistine altar alone, holding up his ballot to be seen. He places it into one of several large urns (instead of the chalice used when there were far fewer electors). He says loudly in Latin, “I call as my witness Christ the Lord, who will be my judge, that my vote is given to the one who before God I think should be elected.”

After all the ballots have been deposited, the folded ballots are mixed and then counted. If the number of ballots does not equal the number of cardinals, the vote is invalid, and another immediately follows. If the number of ballots and electors matches, three cardinals start the tally.

The first two take out a ballot, mark the name down, and pass it along. A third does the same, but he reads the name aloud. The third cardinal also passes a threaded needle through the word *Eligo* on each ballot so it can't be counted twice and so the thread ties all the ballots into a loop. If one candidate does not receive enough votes, another vote is taken immediately. If the second vote does not elect a pope, the cardinals either break to eat (after the first session) or quit for the day (after the second session).

Two-thirds of the votes are required for election. If the number of cardinals cannot be divided equally into three, the vote must be two-thirds plus one. John Paul II decreed that the cardinals can take breaks several times if the voting is not producing a pope, but if there still isn't a pope after about ten days, they can restrict the candidates to the two leading vote-getters in the most recent ballot, with only a simple majority (50 percent plus one) needed for election. Benedict XVI kept this provision but changed the percentage necessary for election back to two-thirds. The two candidates are likely present at this point, but they may not vote.

After each session, one official record of the voting is sealed and deposited in the Vatican archives,

to be opened only with the explicit permission of the pope. All of the ballots, tally sheets, and cardinals' notes are burned in a little stove after each voting session. If no man has been elected, the burning papers send black smoke up and out a long chimney pipe to tell the crowd.

To signal success, white smoke is sent from the chimney; today, chemical pellets are added to the burning papers to color the smoke. Bells also ring when a new pope is elected to avoid the confusion connected with the smoke's frequent grayness. The black/white smoke tradition was first used in 1939 with the election of Pope Pius XII.

The New Pope

When a candidate receives the required number of votes, he is approached and asked in Latin, “Do you accept your canonical election as Supreme Pontiff?” When he says yes, he is asked, “By what name do you wish to be called?” Once he answers, he is the pope.

History almost guarantees that the man selected will be a member of the College of Cardinals present, although he need only be a baptized male. If the man chosen is not a bishop or even a priest, he must be ordained and appointed a bishop immediately. He becomes pope as soon as he is a bishop. The last non-cardinal bishop elected was Urban VI in 1378; the last non-bishop cardinal was Gregory XVI in 1831.

At this point, the new pope is taken to the sacristy of the Sistine Chapel and vested in papal robes, which are kept there in several sizes. The very large John XXIII couldn't squeeze into any of the vestments, so his new cassock was secured with safety pins and the unbuttoned bulge covered with a surplice. He said, “I feel trussed up and ready for delivery.”

The new pope then takes a seat at the altar to receive the cardinals' congratulations. According to a German cardinal, the first words John Paul I said after he sat in this chair in 1978 were, “God will forgive you for what you have done to me.”

Installation

When the white smoke signals a new pope, the news spreads quickly. Shortly afterward, the announcement is made from a balcony to the crowd gathered in St. Peter's Square: “*Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum. Habemus papam!*” (“I announce to you a great joy. We have a pope!”) The new pope's birth name and the name he has taken as pope are announced. He then appears and gives his blessing.

Shortly afterward, the pope is formally installed. He is not ordained as pope, because he has already been ordained as a deacon, a priest, and a bishop. Paul VI was the last to wear the famous papal tiara, and, as it appears unlikely that this worldly symbol will be used again, the event is no longer called a coronation. Since 1978, popes have instead worn a regular bishop's miter and the pallium, a special circle of cloth worn around the neck to symbolize his jurisdiction as chief pastor.

Participation Through Prayer

Pope Saint John Paul II reminded all Catholics that they participate in the election. In *Universi Dominici Gregis*, he wrote, “The election of the new pope will not be something unconnected with the people of God and concerning the College of electors alone but will be in a certain sense an act of the whole Church.” He directed that as soon as news comes of the pope's death, Catholics should pray that a “speedy, harmonious, and fruitful election may take place, as the salvation of souls and the good of the whole people of God demand.”

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