 Reading time: 6 min.

Every death or resignation of a Pontiff opens one of the most delicate phases in the life of the Catholic Church: the election of the Successor of Saint Peter. Although the last conclave dates back to March 2013, when Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Pope Francis, understanding how a Pope is elected remains essential to grasp the functioning of a millennia-old institution that influences over 1.3 billion faithful and — indirectly — global geopolitics.

1. **The Vacant See**

Everything begins with the **vacant see**, that is, the period between the death (or resignation) of the reigning Pontiff and the election of the new one. The apostolic constitution *Universi Dominici Gregis*, promulgated by John Paul II on February 22, 1996, and updated by Benedict XVI in 2007 and 2013, establishes detailed procedures.

Verification of the vacancy

In case of death: the Cardinal Camerlengo — currently Cardinal Kevin Farrell — officially confirms the death, closes and seals the papal apartment, and notifies the Dean of the College of Cardinals.
In case of resignation: the vacant see begins at the time indicated in the resignation act, as happened at 8:00 PM on February 28, 2013, for Benedict XVI.

Ordinary administration

During the vacant see, the Camerlengo manages the material assets of the Holy See but cannot perform acts reserved exclusively for the Pontiff (such as episcopal appointments, doctrinal decisions, etc.).

General and particular congregations

All cardinals — electors and non-electors — present in Rome gather in the Synod Hall to discuss urgent matters. The “particular” congregations include the Camerlengo and three cardinals drawn by lot in rotation; the “general” congregations summon the entire College of Cardinals and are used, among other things, to set the start date of the conclave.

2. Who can elect and who can be elected

The electors
Since Paul VI's motu proprio *Ingravescentem aetatem* (1970), **only cardinals who have not reached the age of 80 before the start of the vacant see have the right to vote.** The maximum number of electors is set at 120, but this can be temporarily exceeded due to closely spaced consistories.
Electors must:
– be present in Rome by the start of the conclave (except for serious reasons);
– take an oath of secrecy;
– stay at the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, the residence established by John Paul II to ensure dignity and discretion.
The enclosure is not a medieval whim: it aims to protect the cardinals' freedom of conscience and shield the Church from undue interference. Breaking the secrecy results in automatic excommunication.

Those eligible
In theory, **any baptized male** can be elected Pope, since the Petrine office is of divine right. However, from the Middle Ages to today, the Pope has always been chosen from among the cardinals. If a non-cardinal or even a layman were chosen, he would have to be immediately ordained a bishop.

3. **The conclave: etymology, logistics, and symbolism**
The term "conclave" comes from the Latin *cum clave*, "with key": the cardinals are "locked in" until the election to avoid external pressures. The enclosure is guaranteed by several rules:
– Allowed places: Sistine Chapel (voting), *Domus Sanctae Marthae* (lodging), a reserved path between the two buildings.
– Communication ban: electronic devices are collected, signal jammers used, *anti-spy controls* in place.
– Secrecy is also ensured by an oath that includes spiritual sanctions (*automatic* excommunication) and canonical penalties.

4. Typical agenda of the conclave
1. "*Pro eligendo Pontifice*" Mass in St. Peter's Basilica on the morning of the entry into the conclave.
2. Procession in the Sistine Chapel reciting the *Veni Creator Spiritus*.

3. Individual oath of the cardinals, pronounced before the Gospel book.
4. *Extra omnes!* (“Everyone out!”): the Master of Pontifical Liturgical Celebrations dismisses those not entitled to stay.
5. First (optional) vote on the afternoon of the entry day.
6. Two daily votes (morning and afternoon) followed by the scrutiny (counting).

5. Voting procedure

Each round follows four steps:

5.1. *Praescrutinium*. Distribution and filling out in Latin of the ballot *“Eligo in Summum Pontificem…”*.

5.2. Scrutinium. Each cardinal, carrying the folded ballot, says: *“Testor Christum Dominum…”*. He deposits the ballot in the urn.

5.3. ***Post-scrutinium***. Three *scrutators* drawn by lot count the ballots, read aloud each name, record it, and perforate the ballot with needle and thread.

5.4. **Burning**. Ballots and notes are burned in a special stove; the colour of the smoke indicates the result.

To be elected, a qualified majority is required, that is, two-thirds of valid votes.

6. The smoke: black waiting, white joy

Since 2005, to make the signal unmistakable to the faithful in St. Peter’s Square, a chemical reagent is added:

– Black smoke (fumata nera): no one elected.

– White smoke (fumata bianca): Pope elected; bells also ring.

After the white smoke, it takes another 30 minutes to an hour before the new Pope is announced by the Cardinal Deacon in St. Peter’s Square. Shortly after (5 to 15 minutes), the new Pope appears to give the *Urbi et Orbi* blessing.

7. ***“Acceptasne electionem?”*** – **Acceptance and pontifical name**

When someone reaches the required threshold, the Dean of the College of Cardinals (or the oldest by order and legal seniority if the Dean is the elected) asks: *“Acceptasne electionem de te canonice factam in Summum Pontificem?”* (Do you accept the canonically made election as Supreme Pontiff?). If the elected consents — *Accepto!* — he is asked: “*Quo nomine vis vocari*?” (By what name do you wish to

be called?). Taking the name is an act full of theological and pastoral meanings: it recalls models (Francis of Assisi) or reform intentions (John XXIII).

8. Immediately following rites

8.1 *Vesting*.
8.2 *Entry into the Chapel of Tears*, where the new Pope can recollect himself.
8.3 *Obedientia*: the electing cardinals file past for the first act of obedience.
8.4 *Announcement to the world*: the Protodeacon appears on the central balcony with the famous "*Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum: habemus Papam!"*
8.5 *First "Urbi et Orbi" blessing* of the new Pontiff.

From that moment, he takes possession of the office and formally begins his pontificate, while the coronation with the pallium and the Fisherman's ring takes place at the inauguration Mass (usually the following Sunday).

9. Some historical aspects and development of the norms

1st–3rd centuries: Acclamation by clergy and Roman people. In the absence of stable norms, imperial influence was strong.
1059 – *In nomine Domini*. College of Cardinals. Nicholas II limits lay intervention; official birth of the conclave.
1274 – *Ubi Periculum*. Mandatory enclosure. Gregory X reduces political manoeuvres, introduces seclusion.
1621–1622 – Gregory XV. Systematic secret ballot. Improvement of ballots; two-thirds requirement.
1970 – Paul VI. Age limit of 80 years. Reduces electorate, favouring quicker decisions.
1996 – John Paul II. *Universi Dominici Gregis*. Modern codification of the process, introduces *Domus Sanctae Marthae*.

10. Some concrete data of this Conclave

Living cardinals: 252 (average age: 78.0 years).
Voting cardinals: 134 (135). Cardinal Antonio Cañizares Llovera, Archbishop Emeritus of Valencia, Spain, and Cardinal John Njue, Archbishop Emeritus of Nairobi, Kenya, have announced that they will not be able to participate in the conclave.
Of the 135 voting cardinals, 108 (80%) were appointed by Pope Francis. 22 (16%) were appointed by Pope Benedict XVI. The remaining 5 (4%) were appointed by

Pope Saint John Paul II.
Of the 135 voting cardinals, 25 participated as electors in the 2013 Conclave.
Average age of the 134 participating cardinal electors: 70.3 years.
Average years of service as cardinal of the 134 participating cardinal electors: 7.1 years.
Average length of a papacy: about 7.5 years.

Start of the Conclave: May 7, Sistine Chapel.
Voting cardinals in the Conclave: 134. Number of votes required for election is two-thirds, i.e., 89 votes.

Voting schedule: 4 votes per day (2 in the morning, 2 in the afternoon).
After 3 full days (to be defined), voting is suspended for a full day ("to allow a prayer pause, informal discussion among electors, and a brief spiritual exhortation").
Then follow 7 more ballots and another pause up to a full day.
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Then 7 more ballots and then a pause to evaluate how to proceed.

11. **Unwritten "internal" dynamics**
Despite the strict legal framework, the choice of the Pope is a spiritual but also a human process influenced by:
– Profiles of candidates ("papabili"): geographic origin, pastoral experience, doctrinal competence.
– Ecclesial currents: curial or pastoral, reformist or conservative, liturgical sensitivities.
– Global agenda : ecumenical relations, inter-religious dialogue, social crises (migrants, climate change).
– Languages and personal networks: cardinals tend to gather by region (the "Latin American" group, "African" group, etc.) and meet informally during meals or "walks" in the Vatican gardens.

A spiritual and institutional event together
The election of a Pope is not a technical step comparable to a corporate assembly. Despite the human dimension, it is a **spiritual act essentially guided by the**

Holy Spirit.

The care of minute rules — from sealing the Sistine doors to burning the ballots — shows how the Church has transformed its long historical experience into a system now perceived as stable and solemn.

Knowing how a Pope is chosen, therefore, is not just curiosity: it is understanding the dynamic between authority, collegiality, and tradition that supports the oldest religious institution still operating worldwide. And, in an age of dizzying changes, that “little smoke” rising from the roof of the Sistine Chapel continues to remind us that centuries-old decisions can still speak to the hearts of billions, inside and outside the Church.

May this knowledge of the data and procedures help us to pray more deeply, as one should pray before every important decision that affects our life.