

Choosing a Pope

WHAT REALLY HAPPENS DURING A PAPAL CONCLAVE

What is a papal conclave?

A papal conclave is the special gathering of the cardinals of the Catholic Church which happens when the Chair of St. Peter, the papacy, is vacant. The purpose is to elect a new pope to fill that vacancy.

What is a cardinal?

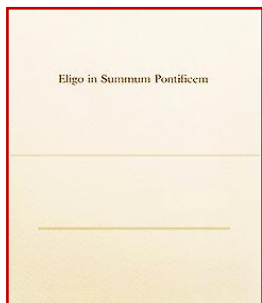
A cardinal is a bishop who is specially chosen and appointed by the pope to serve him and support him in his ministry.

How is a new pope chosen?

The cardinals gather in Rome after the death of the pope. In the first nine days, their job is to pray for the pope and plan for his funeral. After that, they gather in general congregations to talk about the state of the Church today, and the needs of the Church, before having the conclave itself.

The cardinals gather to celebrate Mass in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. They pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to guide their deliberations and their voting. After that Mass, they chant an invocation to the Holy Spirit and process into the Sistine Chapel. They hear another sermon exhorting them to this great task and the importance of electing the new pope. Then everyone but the Cardinal Electors, those under the age of 80, leave the chapel, the doors are locked, and the voting begins.

What does the process of voting look like?



Secret Ballots that say: "Eligo in Summum Pontificem" (Latin for: "I elect as the most high pontiff") with a blank space for the writing of the name of the person chosen, are distributed to all Cardinal Electors in the room. Once a name is written on it, it is folded over twice and brought to the front of the chapel. Each cardinal then says a prayer and

an oath and deposits their ballot into a container.

After all the ballots are deposited, the votes are then counted and double-checked by several Cardinals. If a candidate receives a two-thirds majority of votes and accepts the role, he is the next pope.

What happens if no candidate receives enough votes?

The voting has to continue. Those ballots are burned and another round of voting follows. If after several rounds of voting there is no agreement, there is a pause. That pause is used for rest, prayer, and more discussion. If after a few more rounds no one is elected, the top two names from the last vote become the two choices that are then voted on. The top two can no longer vote, and the one with at least two-thirds of the votes is then offered the papacy.

Why are cardinals locked inside the Sistine Chapel?

One reason is they are to be protected from undue influence from external events or news. Another is a spiritual reason. To have the doors locked, is like going into seclusion—it is very much like going on a retreat. The cardinals are praying and imploring God's help, and are better able to concentrate all of their powers without distraction on the task that God has set before them.

How is the world informed during a conclave?

If a vote does not manage to elect the next pope, those ballots are burned and send up smoke through the chimney of the Sistine Chapel. It is that smoke that becomes the primary signal to the outside world what is going on inside the Sistine Chapel.

Meaning behind the black and white smoke signals

When the ballots are burned where a pope has not been elected, an added ingredient causes the smoke to be black. When the two-thirds majority vote is reached, white smoke comes up out of the chimney, signaling that a new pope has been elected. Now, just so there is no confusion, the bells of St. Peter's Basilica are rung to joyfully announce that a new pope has been elected.

The role of the Holy Spirit in electing a pope

Throughout the whole process of choosing a pope there are continual invocations to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is really front and center, guiding this whole process. The election of the pope is 100% the movement of the Holy Spirit, and 100% the movement of the whole Church especially embodied in the cardinals who are voting in the conclave elections.

What happens after a new pope is chosen

The newly elected is asked if he accepts this office of the papacy, and when he accepts, each of the cardinals in the room then come forward to pledge their obedience and service to the new pope. The pope chooses a name, and prays, and puts on white vestments. He then moves to the balcony of St. Peter's where he is presented to the world as the new Pope.

The legitimacy and authority of a new pope

As soon as a pope is validly elected, he possesses that full authority within the Catholic Church. The world greets him as he steps outside on the balcony, and Catholics acknowledge him and celebrate him as their new pope, as their spiritual father in the Church, as the one who has full authority within the Church.

How Catholics can participate during a conclave

We can, and should, pray for the election of the new pope. We also pray for the cardinals who are gathered. Even if there is not a conclave going on, it is good to always be praying for the pope and for the cardinals who serve him and support him in his ministry to the whole Church.