



Death and Election of a Pope

A Brief Backgrounder

The cardinals who gather to elect the next pope will follow a 1996 document issued by Pope John Paul II, the apostolic constitution, *Universi Dominici Gregis*, which governs the process to be followed when the papacy is vacant.

Sequence of Events

- **Death and Funeral**

The camerlengo confirms the pope's death. Traditionally, he would tap the Holy Father's forehead three times with a small silver hammer while calling out his baptismal name. However, in light of modern advances in determining death, this may no longer occur.

The papal apartment is sealed.

The world community is informed. The Dean of the College of Cardinals, currently Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, formally notifies world leaders, the diplomatic corps and the other cardinals. According to *Conclave* by John Allen, the note sent to the cardinals in 1978 regarding Pope Paul VI read, "The pope is dead. Come at once. Villot."

The heads of dicasteries (Vatican departments) lose their jobs (with few exceptions, one being the Major Penitentiary, currently Cardinal James Stafford, an American, and another the Camerlengo).

All cardinals under 80 years old travel to Rome; cardinals over 80 may choose to do so.

The cardinals meet daily in General Congregations between the death and the start of the election. They plan for the funeral and election; ensure the destruction of the Fisherman's Ring (used to seal papal documents); and choose two theologians known for sound doctrine to present meditations on (1) issues facing the church and (2) the need for careful discernment in choosing the pope. Cardinals over 80 may participate in the General Congregations. A Particular Congregation of four cardinals also meets to handle ordinary matters.

The funeral is 4-6 days after death. Burial typically is in a crypt below St. Peter's Basilica. The pope is buried in his vestments, with a certified death certificate, key documents of his papacy, coins and medals struck during his papacy and the destroyed Fisherman's ring.

Nine days of memorial Masses are observed, starting with the funeral Mass.

- **Conclave**

The conclave, or election, begins 15-20 days after death, with the cardinals assembling in the Sistine Chapel.

The order “*extra omnes*” (all out) is given and everyone not authorized to be in the room must leave.

Secrecy and avoiding outside influence is vital. The cardinals take two oaths of secrecy, one when they arrive in Rome and one when the conclave begins. The Sistine Chapel is swept for electronic listening devices; the cardinals are barred from outside communications, including reading the news; and they must stay together at the Domus Santa Marta, a residence on Vatican grounds.

The few people allowed near them must take an oath of secrecy: aides/masters of ceremonies; housekeeping and cooking staff; two doctors; and priests for hearing confessions. A cardinal who is ill and requires assistance may have a personal aide. All of these people must be approved by the Particular Congregation.

Election is by scrutiny, or secret ballot. A two-thirds majority of the electors is required to elect a pope.

Cardinals write the name of his selection on a ballot that is then folded in half. In seniority order, each elector then carries his completed ballot in the air so all can see it, places it on a paten (plate) placed on the altar and drops the ballot into a repository.

Two votes are held each morning and each afternoon until a pope is elected. Depending on when the conclave begins and how long it takes for all of the cardinals to take their oaths, a single vote may be held the first day.

If the vote is inconclusive, the ballots are burned and black smoke rises. (Traditionally, the black smoke was caused by using wet straw, now chemicals are used). If a vote is successful, white smoke rises.

If there is an impasse after three days, the cardinals take a short break for prayer, informal discussion among themselves and a brief spiritual exhortation by the Senior Cardinal Deacon, currently Cardinal Jorge Medina Estevez, then go through up to three more series of seven votes, break, etc. At that point, the cardinals may vote (by simple majority) to elect a pope by an absolute majority (50 percent plus one) instead of by two-thirds. They may also vote at that point to limit the candidates to the top two choices.

- **A New Pope is Elected**

The Dean of the College of Cardinals, currently Cardinal Ratzinger, asks the newly chosen pontiff, “Do you accept your canonical election as Supreme Pontiff?” If the answer is yes, he immediately becomes the bishop of Rome and pope. At this time, hee also chooses the papal name by which he will be known.

The newly elected pope changes into white papal vestments (cardinals wear red “choir” dress while voting) and returns to the Sistine Chapel where the cardinals offer a sign of obedience and homage.

He goes to the balcony over the main door of St. Peter’s Basilica. The Senior Cardinal-Deacon, currently Cardinal Jorge Medina Estevez, announces in Latin that a new pope has been elected and gives his baptismal name, surname and chosen papal name.

The new pope gives his *urbi et orbi* (to the city and world) blessing.

He is installed during a Mass within a few days.

Key players and their names

Camerlengo: roles include confirming the death of the Holy Father; administering the Church’s property and finances during the *sede vacante*; and destroying the Fisherman’s Ring. The current Camerlengo is **Cardinal Eduardo Martinez Somalo** was appointed to this position by Pope John Paul II in 1993.

Dean of the College of Cardinals: a senior cardinal elected by the cardinals bishops (see “ranks of cardinals” below) and approved by the pope; presides over the General Congregations (see “general congregation” below) of cardinals during the *sede vacante*; notifies international leaders and the diplomatic corps; and calls the cardinals to Rome when the pope dies. The current Dean is **Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger**.

Senior Cardinal Deacon: proclaims the name of a newly elected Pope to the public and gives a “spiritual exhortation” to the Cardinals if a Pope hasn’t been elected after three days of voting. The current Senior Cardinal Deacon is **Cardinal Jorge Medina Estevez**, who was appointed by Pope John Paul II in Feb. 2005. He is 78, Chilean and past President of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

Ranks of Cardinals

Papal conclave rules refer to the three ranks of cardinals in assigning a few key roles (such as announcing the pope’s death or election):

Cardinal bishops: six Latin-rite cardinals, one of whom is dean of the College of Cardinals, and the Patriarchs of the Eastern Catholic Churches

Cardinal priests: mainly diocesan archbishops, but some curial members

Cardinal deacons: mainly curial members

Congregations (meet during the death and beginning of the election of a new Pope)

General Congregation: the cardinals who have gathered in Rome following a vacancy in the Apostolic See. They meet daily until the election and handle serious matters, such as

plans for the burial of the pope and election of the next pope, and they approve the expenses for this.

Particular Congregation: a group of four cardinals that handles routine matters during the *sede vacante*. It includes the camerlengo and three other cardinals, one from each rank of cardinal.

Election: Key Words

Electors: also known as cardinal electors, these are cardinals under the age of 80 when the pope dies, eligible to enter the conclave.

Infimarii: three cardinals chosen by lot who distribute and collect ballots from cardinals too infirm to be in the Sistine Chapel (infirm cardinals stay at Santa Marta)

Revisers: three cardinals chosen by lot who double check the scrutineers' counts after each ballot.

Scrutiny: method of voting by secret ballot. This is the sole voting method permitted in *Universi Dominici Gregis*.

Scrutineers: three cardinals chosen by lot who count the votes

Sistine Chapel: place where the election is held

Other Key Words

Sede vacante: time the Apostolic See is vacant.

Universi Dominici Gregis: Pope John Paul II's 1996 apostolic constitution on the guidelines to follow when the papacy is vacant.