



# Questions and Answers On the Process of Electing a Pope

## 1. Who governs the Church in the intervening time between when a Pope dies and another is elected (the *Interregnum*)?

When a Pope dies, a Cardinal (currently Cardinal Kevin Farrell) known as the Camerlengo (or Chamberlain) runs the administration and finances of the Holy See in the period during which the See of Saint Peter is vacant (“*sede vacante*”).

The College of Cardinals, under the leadership of its Dean (currently Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re), assume responsibility for governing the Church during a vacancy.

## 2. What is a conclave?

A conclave is a process by which a new Pope is elected.

## 3. When do conclaves begin?

A conclave must begin between 15 and 20 days after the date when the See of Saint Peter becomes vacant (“*sede vacante*”). The present conclave will begin on 7 May 2025.

## 4. Who oversees a conclave?

A conclave is overseen by the Dean of the College of Cardinals. Since the present Dean and the Vice-Dean of the College of cardinals are more than 80 years of age, they are not among the electors and cannot be present, nor oversee the conclave. Cardinal Parolin who has precedence by order and seniority among the order of Cardinal-Bishops will oversee the conclave.

## 5. Who participates in the conclave?

As of April 2025, there are 252 cardinals. Of these, 135 are eligible to vote in a conclave to elect a new Pope. The Holy See provides details information about the membership

of the College of Cardinals in its online “[Dashboard College of Cardinals](#).”

Although the Holy Father appoints Cardinals to serve for life, since Pope Paul VI, the duty of voting for a new Pope is dissolved for those Cardinals who are 80 years of age and older by the day of the Pope’s death.

## 6. Who is eligible to be elected Pope?

- Must be a baptized Catholic and male.
- Typically elected from among the College of Cardinals, not excluding Cardinals who are 80 and over. However, since Cardinals are not required to be Bishops, if the person elected were not a Bishop, he would have to be ordained to the episcopate before being announced as Pope; this is because the role of the Pope is first to be the Bishop of Rome. This is why he is elected by the College of Cardinals, who by ancient custom, are considered titular or honorary members of the clergy of Rome.

## 7. What is the structure of a conclave and how does it proceed?

### **The process<sup>1</sup>:**

- The College of Cardinals have a few days to convene at the Vatican before the conclave begins. This is known as the General Congregation of the Cardinals.
- The conclave begins with a Votive Mass for the Election of the Pope in St. Peter’s Basilica.
- Following this Mass, the Cardinal electors assemble in the Pauline Chapel of the Apostolic Palace to recite special prayers, invoking the Holy Spirit.
- They then solemnly process to the Sistine Chapel where they swear an oath of secrecy and promise to follow the laws established for electing a new Pope. During the election, anyone who violates the requirement of secrecy is subject to the penalty of excommunication (*latae sententiae*, i.e. *ipso facto*).
- Before voting begins, a specially selected priest, chosen from among the order of priests, delivers a meditation. Then the Master of Papal Liturgical Ceremonies and the Secretary of the College of Cardinals, as well as any others who may be assisting in a non-voting capacity, are ordered to leave the room with the words in Latin: *Extra omnes* (“Out, all [of you]”). The Sistine Chapel’s doors are then

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1 Pope Benedict XVI, *Universi Dominici Gregis* (Rome, 22 February 2013), paragraphs 63-75.

sealed. This action is the origin of the word “conclave” or “with key.” The Master of Papal Liturgical Ceremonies and the Secretary of the College of Cardinals are non-Cardinal Priests or Bishops who assist between sessions in the process of the election of the new Pope.

- Voting takes place by secret ballot. Each Cardinal elector (from oldest to youngest) writes the name of only one candidate on a ballot marked *Eligo in summum pontificem*: (“I elect as supreme pontiff:”), folds the paper, places it on a shallow plate (paten) on the altar and slides it into an urn. Three Cardinals, known as *Infirmarii*, take ballots to sick Cardinals who could not be present due to infirmity, if there are any staying at the Casa Santa Marta.
- Three Scrutineers, selected from among the Cardinal electors, count the ballots, read out each ballot, and record each vote. Another three Cardinals, known as Revisors, check the work of the Scrutineers to ensure accuracy. After each vote is counted, it is pierced and threaded together with the others to be burnt once the count is recorded.
- On the first day of the conclave, there shall only be one vote. On the second day, there shall be four votes, followed by four more on the third day, giving the Cardinal a chance to revise their vote in the hopes of reaching a consensus.
- A two-thirds majority is required to elect a new Pope. Whenever the tally is insufficient, the ballots are burned in a stove of wet straw to produce black smoke, signifying to the world that a new Pope has not been elected.
- The process continues with a limit of four ballots per day until a two-thirds majority is met, as follows. If, after three days of voting, there is no result, voting will be paused for one day to allow Cardinal electors to pray, discuss and hear a brief spiritual exhortation by the Senior Cardinal in the Order of Deacons. Voting then resumes.
- If, after seven ballots, there is no election, voting will be paused to allow the Cardinal electors to enter into prayer, discernment and a brief spiritual exhortation by the senior Cardinal in the Order of Priests. Voting then resumes.
- If, after another seven ballots, there is no election, voting will be paused to allow the Cardinal electors to enter into prayer, discussion and a brief spiritual exhortation by the Senior Cardinal in the Order of Bishops. Voting then resumes.
- If, after another seven ballots, the two-thirds majority has not been attained, one day shall be dedicated to prayer, reflection and dialogue. Voting then resumes on only the two names which received the greatest number of votes in the previous

scrutiny. At this stage, the two candidates who are eligible to become the Pope are not eligible to cast a vote.

- *Habemus Papam!* (“We have a Pope!”): Once the two-thirds majority is met, the Cardinal Dean, if he is elector, or the Cardinal who is first in order and seniority, in the name of all Cardinal electors, then asks the consent of the one elected, “Do you accept your canonical election as Supreme Pontiff?” If the answer is “yes”, he proceeds to ask him “By what name do you wish to be called?” If the person elected is a Bishop, he is immediately recognized as the Pope, and is then able to exercise full and supreme power over the universal Church. If the person elected is not a Bishop, he must be ordained Bishop before being announced as the Pope. After the Cardinal electors make an act of homage and obedience to the newly elected Pope, they make an act of thanksgiving to God, after which the senior Cardinal Deacon proceeds to the balcony of the Vatican Basilica, where he announces in Latin the name of the new Pope. The Pope then appears on the balcony, where he is greeted by the crowd, and imparts the Apostolic Blessing *Urbi et Orbi* (“to the City of Rome and to the World”).

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