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The Papacy

What the Pope Does and Why It Matters

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Chapter 5

The Selection of the Pope

Most people think a new pope is the successor of the pope he *replaces*. Therefore, Francis is the successor of Benedict XVI, who was the successor of John Paul II.

But that is not all there is to it. The pope is *not* just the successor of the previous pope. He is the successor of *Peter*—Peter the Apostle.

How did the selection of popes in the early Church take place, how did the selection process evolve, and how does it work today? And what is the significance of the black and the white smoke?

Peter and His Early Successors

In chapter 4, we learned some of the reasons *why* Jesus chose Peter to lead the Church. Jesus apparently had several reasons. Peter was a natural leader. He was outspoken (a trait the Holy Spirit could refine), flexible, and humble enough to accept Jesus' corrections. He had hope, a hope that carried him through the guilt of his betrayal—a hope Judas lacked. He had faith, enough to walk on the water. He had love, enough to lay down his life for Jesus. But Jesus also chose Peter because Peter had received the revelation from God identifying who Jesus really was (Mt 16:15–18).

We also know *how* Jesus chose Peter. He appointed him, as any king would appoint his chief steward.

Peter's appointment may have been the model for appointing Peter's first successors. The New Testament refers several times to apostles appointing elders of churches, through the laying on of hands. Possibly, the first four popes were appointed by their predecessors. We know very little of the selection process in the first century, but if the early popes were appointed by their predecessors, it appears that in the early second century the appointment of the bishop of Rome ended following the pontificate of Alexander I.

Evolution of the Conclave

After A.D. 105, popes appear to have been elected. Selection of the pope meant selecting the bishop of Rome, so the election was restricted to Rome and its immediate vicinity. Everybody in that Christian community was involved, including neighboring bishops, Roman clergy, and even laity. The clergy would choose a candidate, and then the laity would affirm the choice by acclamation.

In the fifth century, Pope Leo I modified this method somewhat (creating the custom of having the current pope make rules for the selection of the next pope). Under Leo's plan, the community would provide a list of nominees. The laity and clergy together would shorten the list, and then the clergy and local bishops would make the final selection.

From the sixth to the tenth centuries, secular rulers, political dignitaries, military officials, and prominent families began interfering in papal elections to get their own favorites elected. Attempts to appease or to get around the

interference would cause long delays between elections, and when an election finally took place, the process could last months. Also, the city of Rome often erupted in riots following an unpopular decision.

Pope Nicholas II (1059–1061) made cardinals responsible for the papal election. Under this plan, neighboring dioceses submitted the names of candidates and then cardinal priests narrowed down the list of choices. Cardinal bishops made the final choice. The Roman clergy and laity could approve, but their role was passive.

The Third Lateran Council (1179) ruled that a two-thirds majority of cardinals was needed to elect the pope. But since the council didn't say how quickly the election had to occur after the papacy became vacant, a long time might pass between the death of a pope and the next election. Getting the necessary majority could take a while, too. The longest papal election ever took nearly three years (1268–1271). Eventually, the frustrated citizens tore off the roof of the papal palace where the cardinals were meeting, locked them inside, and restricted them to a diet of bread and water. The election of Gregory X followed quickly.

That solution created the conclave—a meeting of the College of Cardinals for the purpose of electing a pope. Gregory liked it so much that he enshrined it in Church law (see Longest and Shortest Conclaves on p. 98).

At that time, cardinals could elect a pope by acclamation. But that method fell into disuse; the last pope to be elected by acclamation was Gregory XV (1621–1623). If no one garnered a two-thirds majority vote, the cardinals could "compromise" by selecting a small, odd-numbered group of cardinals to do the voting for everyone else. But that method removed responsibility from the whole College of Cardinals, and recently has been forbidden.

Longest and Shortest Conclaves

The election of Gregory X lasted more than two years and nine months. In 1274, Pope Gregory mandated in the bull *Ubi Periculum* that elections start within ten days of a pope's death. Plus, the cardinal electors were to be locked in with a key (*cum clave*, thus *conclave*); and the longer it took to elect a candidate, the more their food, outside contacts, and income would be restricted. A couple of subsequent popes abandoned the idea, but it was soon restored with minor changes.

The shortest conclave seems to have been the first one after Gregory's death (1276). It lasted only a day and resulted in the election of Innocent V.

With the emergence of absolute monarchies in the sixteenth century, various governments tried to steer the outcome of papal elections in their favor. They claimed the right to tell their cardinals whom to vote for from a list of likely candidates, or to promise to abide by government vetoes. The problem came to a head at the conclave of 1903, when the Austro-Hungarian emperor vetoed the results of a ballot. But by then, the cardinals had had enough. Upon his election, Pius X outlawed the veto, placing papal elections entirely in the hands of the cardinals (see Veto on p. 99).

Traditionally, a conclave takes place when a pope dies. But a papal resignation would also prompt a conclave. Celestine V (1294), Gregory XII (1406–1415), and Benedict XVI (2005–2013) all resigned for various reasons, and Francis has hinted that resignation is a possibility for him.

Veto at the Conclave of 1903

Leo XIII died on July 20, 1903. One cardinal likely to be elected at the conclave was Cardinal Rampolla, Leo's secretary of state. When the vote on August 2 favored the cardinal, the cardinal archbishop of Kraków announced Emperor Franz Josef's veto. The cardinals, including Rampolla, protested the veto, and went on with the voting. On the seventh vote, the two-thirds majority favored Giuseppe Sarto of Venice. He took the name Pius X and the motto "To renew all things in Christ". That renewal included doing away (in January 1904) with a supposed right of a secular government to intervene in papal elections. The pope also mandated automatic excommunication for any cardinal that would try to exercise or even threaten the veto.

During WWII, Pius XII made provisions that if he were taken prisoner by the Nazis, he would resign so that a new pope could be elected rather than let the Nazis use him as a hostage. While papal resignations have been rare in Church history, Benedict XVI's resignation suggests that they could become more common.

The Selection Process Today

The cardinal who summons the conclave is the chamberlain of the papal household (*camerlengo* in Italian). When a papal vacancy occurs, he manages the process of electing the new pope. If the pope has died, he must confirm that

death has truly taken place, destroy the pope's ring and seals (lest they be misused), and close the papal apartments. (The same procedure is followed if the pope resigns.) The chamberlain also announces the pope's death publicly and arranges the funeral.

When a conclave becomes necessary, the papal chamberlain summons the cardinals to Rome from all over the world. The conclave begins between fifteen and twenty days later. His job is so crucial that one of the new pope's first actions is to appoint a papal chamberlain.

The conclave always takes place in the Sistine Chapel, starting with the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus* ("Come, Creator Spirit"). At each vote, the cardinals write the name of a candidate on a paper ballot, fold it, and walk up to a special chalice to deposit it. As they drop the ballot into the chalice, they swear an oath that the man they are voting for is the person they believe the Holy Spirit wants elected. If no candidate receives a two-thirds majority, the ballots are burned in a special stove with wet straw, producing black smoke coming out of the chimney. The cardinals then proceed to another vote. Once a candidate receives a two-thirds majority, the ballots are mixed with dry straw, producing white smoke. The world then knows that we have a new pope!

Thereupon, the chamberlain asks the elected cardinal if he accepts the election and, if so, what name he wishes to take (see Popes on p. 101). If he is a bishop, the new pope assumes office the moment he accepts his election. If he is not yet a bishop, he must be consecrated a bishop first; then he becomes pope upon ordination. (This provision is largely hypothetical; no nonbishop has been elected pope in a very long time.)

Popes tend to take a close interest in the procedures for the election of the next pope. Seven popes in the

Popes Who Changed Their Names

The first pope to change his name was John II (533–535). His given name was Mercury, the name of a pagan god. He changed it to John in honor of Pope John I (523–526), who had been imprisoned by Theodoric, king of Italy.

Another noteworthy name change was that of Sergius IV (1009–1012). His given name was Peter di Porca. He disliked being called Peter II, however (Peter I being the apostle), so he took another name.

Usually, a pope takes the name of a predecessor he admires, or whose policies or pastoral vision he wishes to continue (though he may select another name, as Jorge Bergoglio did by choosing the name Francis after Saint Francis of Assisi; there was no previous pope of that name). The change of name also reflects a total commitment to the office.

The use of double names began with Albino Luciani, who took the name John Paul I (1978) to honor Pope John XXIII (1958–1963) and Pope Paul VI (1963–1978). John Paul I lived only a month after his election, however. When Karol Wojtyla was elected, he took the same double name for similar reasons, becoming John Paul II.

twentieth century have written guidelines for the selection of a successor. Under John Paul II, for example, the rules include the following.

First, the methods of acclamation and compromise, described earlier, are out. Both were too subjective or unwieldy. The election must be made by secret ballot.

The two-thirds rule still applies unless a protracted deadlock emerges, in which case a simple majority may be used. (In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI rescinded the simple majority rule.)

Second, the election must take place in the Sistine Chapel, the traditional location for the last four hundred years.

Third, as in the past, the electors are secluded and the proceedings are kept secret. The new rules, though, add some modern touches: no letters, phone calls, e-mails, faxes, newspapers, or televisions are allowed within the area set aside for the election. And the Sistine Chapel is to be inspected for bugging devices.

Fourth, before voting, the cardinals must listen to two talks on the current problems facing the Church and the need for careful discernment in the selection of the new pope. Like the popes before him, John Paul II urged electors to make their choice freely before God and apart from personal friendships and political concerns.

Finally, cardinal electors no longer have to sleep in temporary cells. They will be housed—under strict surveillance—in St. Martha's Residence, a lodging for visiting clergy that can accommodate 130 guests. (Paul VI decreed in 1975 that cardinals who reached the age of eighty were ineligible to vote in the conclave, and that the number of cardinal electors would be limited to 120.)

Above and beyond the human efforts, the Holy Spirit is at work in these conclaves. It is the promise of Jesus to be with his Church until the end of time, and his intimate involvement with the Church is very much realized in the election and oversight of the pope.