

How Popes are Elected

When a Pope dies, the "Cardinal Camerlengo" (Cardinal Chamberlain) first verifies the death. Traditionally, this is done by striking the Pope's forehead gently thrice with a silver hammer while asking him, using his Baptismal name, if he is dead, e.g., "Karol Wojtyla, are you dead?" When there is no response from the dead Pope, the Camerlengo solemnly announces his death and removes the Fisherman's ring from the dead Pope's finger. This ring, along with the papal seal, are broken, and the Pope's bedroom and study are sealed up. The bells of the Vatican toll the death, and all the bells of Rome join in.

During the nine-day period of mourning, known as novendiales, that follows the Pope's death, a novena of Masses is said and the Camerlengo (who is now in charge of the Church until a new Pope is elected) arranges the funeral. The Pope will lie in state and will then be buried around the 5th day of the novena. His body will be put inside three coffins -- the first made of cypress, the second of iron and inscribed with his name and the date of his pontificate (inside this coffin the broken papal seal is placed), and the third coffin made of elm -- and then interred in a crypt underneath St. Peter's Basilica.

Most of the dicasteries of the Curia are suspended from operation during this all this time and until a new Pope is elected; only the very basic, day to day functions of "the Vatican" are carried out. Arrangements are made by the Camerlengo to elect a new Pope.

After choosing three assistant Cardinals, the Camerlengo will call a Conclave which will meet in the Sistine Chapel. The Conclave will consist of 120 Cardinal electors and takes its name from the Latin words "cum clave" -- "with a key." This gathering is so-called because it is conducted under the utmost secrecy, the Cardinals at one time being literally locked into the Sistine Chapel, where the voting takes place, until they came to a decision (nowadays they sleep in more comfortable quarters in the Vatican at night). The election process must begin between 15 and 20 days after the death. Upon entering the Conclave, the Cardinals swear an oath of secrecy, the penalties for breaking being automatic excommunication. The secrecy of the Conclave is taken so seriously, that the Cardinals cannot communicate with anyone in the outside world as it goes on, and even windows are painted over so they can't see out. Newspapers, television, radio -- all are disallowed.

The Cardinal Dean will read the following oath:

We, the Cardinals of Holy Roman Church, of the Order of Bishops, of Priests and of Deacons, promise, pledge and swear, as a body and individually, to observe exactly and faithfully all the norms contained in the Apostolic Constitution *Universi Dominici Gregis* of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II, and to maintain rigorous secrecy with regard to all matters in any way related to the election of the Roman Pontiff or those which, by their very nature, during the vacancy of the Apostolic See, call for the same secrecy.

Each Cardinal affirms this oath by saying:

And I, N_____ Cardinal N_____ so promise, pledge and swear.

He places his hand on the Gospels and adds:

So help me God and these Holy Gospels which I now touch with my hand.

Once in the Sistine Chapel, another oath is taken. The Cardinal Dean will read the following oath:

We, the Cardinal electors present in this election of the Supreme Pontiff promise, pledge and swear, as individuals and as a group, to observe faithfully and scrupulously the prescriptions contained in the Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II, *Universi Dominici Gregis*, published on 22 February 1996. We likewise promise, pledge and swear that whichever of us by divine disposition is elected Roman Pontiff will commit himself faithfully to carrying out the *munus Petrinum* of Pastor of the Universal Church and will not fail to affirm and defend strenuously the spiritual and temporal rights and the liberty of the Holy See. In a particular way, we promise and swear to observe with the greatest fidelity and with all persons, clerical or lay, secrecy regarding everything that in any way relates to the election of the Roman Pontiff and regarding what occurs in the place of the election, directly or indirectly related to the results of the voting; we promise and swear not to break this secret in any way, either

during or after the election of the new Pontiff, unless explicit authorization is granted by the same Pontiff; and never to lend support or favour to any interference, opposition or any other form of intervention, whereby secular authorities of whatever order and degree or any group of people or individuals might wish to intervene in the election of the Roman Pontiff.

Each Cardinal elector will affirm:

And I, N_____ Cardinal N_____, do so promise, pledge and swear.

Placing his hand on the Gospels, he will add:

So help me God and these Holy Gospels which I touch with my hand.

The Cardinal electors (who, since Pope Paul VI, must be under the age of 80 to serve as electors ²) are given paper ballots inscribed with the words, "Eligo in suum pontificem" ("I elect as Supreme Pontiff") with an area for them to write in their preference. These ballots are placed on the Altar by each Cardinal in order of seniority. The Cardinal will kneel and say aloud, "I call to witness the Lord Christ, who will be my judge, that I am electing the one whom, under God, I think ought to be elected." He then places the ballot on a paten, slides it into a large chalice, bows to the Altar, and returns to his seat.

These ballots are read aloud first by the Camerlengo, by each of his three assistants, and then tallied. When the ballots arrive at the third assistant, they are bound together by needle and thread. If no person has received a 2/3 vote, there is another vote. If still no Pope has been elected, the ballots are burned along with straw so that the smoke is black; if a Pope has been elected, the paper is burned alone so that the smoke is white. Crowds and media personnel gather at the Vatican to watch for those black or white smoke signals as they are the only way for the Conclave to communicate with the outside world until an official announcement of an election is made.

If after voting for three days, no Pope has been elected, a day is taken to rest, pray, and discuss. When voting is resumed, if seven more days pass with no decision being made, another day of rest and prayer is taken. Another series of seven ballots is held, followed by another day of rest and prayer, if necessary. Then again, another series of seven ballots is held. At this point, if still no Pope is elected, they may elect a Pope by absolute majority (i.e., 50%+1 instead of the 2/3 majority) or decide to vote only on the two candidates who ranked first and second in the most recent tally (this, too, is a novelty).

Once a Pope is elected, the elected person is asked by the Cardinal Dean:

Do you accept your canonical election as Supreme Pontiff?

He is then asked:

By what name do you wish to be called?

If he accepts, he becomes Pope and goes to a room called "The Room of Tears" to be vested in white soutane. The room is called this because so many new Popes break down and weep as they ponder the enormity of the sacred responsibilities they have assumed. Spiritual father to a billion Catholics! Shepherd of souls! Vicar of *Christ*!

He is introduced to the world with the words:

Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum. Habemus Papam. Eminentissimum ac Reverendissimum Dominum, Dominum ____ Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae Cardinalem ____ qui sibi nomen imposuit ____.

(I announce to you a great joy. We have a Pope. The most eminent and reverend Lord, the Lord ____ Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church who takes to himself the name ____.)

The new Pope goes to the balcony to impart an Apostolic blessing "Urbi et Orbi" (which means "For the City and the World"), and the crowd cheers "Viva il Papa!" ("Long live the Pope!").

A few days later, the first Papal Mass will be held at St. Peter's. On the way to the Altar, the procession stops three times and, at each, a piece of flax mounted on a reed is burned. As the flames die, the Pope hears the words, "Pater sancte, sic transit gloria mundi" ("Holy Father, thus passes the glory of the world") to remind him that he is, indeed, a man, a mere mortal.

Note: Any Catholic man can become Pope, whether he is a priest or not, but most times, the new Pope will come from the Cardinalate and has long been considered "papabile" (able and likely enough to be elected Pope).