

The Election of the Roman Pontiff

By Sister Catherine Darcy

Many of us may remember the appearance of newly elected Pope Francis on the Vatican balcony on the evening of March 13, 2013. He greeted all in Vatican Square and throughout the world with the familiar words, “*Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen.*” We may have asked how did the Argentinian Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, of whom many had never heard of before, become the leader of the then 1.25 billion Catholics?

Because of the mandated secrecy in papal elections, we should never know the details of any particular Papal Conclave. However, a review of the current norms governing the Election of the Roman Pontiff may provide some insight as to that which transpires during a Papal Conclave. ¹

The Papal Conclave mirrors the Church Universal

Members of the Papal Conclave come from every continent. The table below shows the continent of origin for each of the cardinal electors. ²

Table 1					
Region	Conclave 2013	Conclave 2025	Change	Percentage of 2025 Conclave	Percentage of Catholic Population
Europe	60	53	-7	39.3%	20.4%
Asia	10	23	+13	17%	11%
Central & South America	19	21	+2	15.6%	41.2%
Africa	11	18	+7	13.3%	20.0%
North America	14	16	+2	11.8%	6.6%
Oceania	1	4	+3	3.0%	0.8%
Total	115	135	+20	100%	100%

A full list of cardinal electors can be found [here](#).

The Cardinals assemble in Vatican City

While a good number of Cardinals may be in Rome at the time of a Pope’s death, others soon arrive from the ends of the earth. Cardinals in Rome begin meeting almost immediately, as a

¹ In 1996, Pope John Paul II published his Apostolic Constitution, *Universi Dominici Gregis: On the Vacancy of the Apostolic See and the Election of the Roman Pontiff* which was amended slightly by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007 and 2013.¹ John Paul II’s document with Benedict XVI’s modifications provides the norms governing the 2025 papal election. That document can be accessed [HERE](#). Rather than footnote each reference to *Universi Dominici Gregis*, the cited sections will be referenced at the end of each section.

² Jonathan Y. Tan, “Conclave will reflect Church’s new-found global orientation,” in *Union of Catholic Asian News*, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/conclave-will-reflect-churchs-new-found-global-orientation/108625#:~:text=Most%20important%20of%20all%2C%20as,in%20the%20upcoming%20papal%20conclave>.

College of Cardinals, upon the announcement of the Pope's death. They plan the Pope's funeral, and individual Cardinals may express their views and concerns about the upcoming Conclave and discuss what they see as the needs of the Church at this time.

As the Cardinals arrive and participate in the meetings, they receive a copy of the prevailing norms for the Papal Conclave and take an oath to uphold *rigorous secrecy* in all matters related to the election of the Roman Pontiff. While all Cardinals may take part in the Pope's funeral only the Cardinals who have not yet celebrated their 80th birthday before the day when Pope died participate in the Papal Conclave. As preparations are underway, care is taken so nothing interferes with the solemnity and the secrecy of the Papal Conclave. The Sistine Chapel, the venue of the actual election, is examined to ensure that no electronic transmission or recording equipment has been installed surreptitiously. In addition to the Cardinal electors, anyone having any type of contact with them is bound to secrecy, under the pain of automatic excommunication, concerning anything that takes place at the Conclave. *Universi Dominici Gregis*, nos. 7-13, 33, 55.

The Papal Conclave begins

On or about 15 days after the death of a Pope, the Cardinals gather in the morning to celebrate the Votive Mass *Pro Eligendo*. Then, in the afternoon of that same day, the Cardinal electors solemnly process, while chanting the *Veni Creator*, into the Sistine Chapel. The Cardinal electors then take another oath where they *pledge and swear* to observe the norms governing the papal election and to "*observe absolute and perpetual secrecy*" regarding everything that in any way relates to the election of the Pope. A person appointed by the College of Cardinals then provides a meditation on the "problems facing the Church at the time and on the need for careful discernment in choosing the new Pope," after which the appointee and the Master of Papal Liturgical Celebrations leave the Sistine Chapel. If the Cardinal electors indicate they are ready, the balloting for the election of the Pope can then proceed. Only one ballot is held on this first afternoon of the Papal Conclave. *Universi Dominici Gregis*, 11, 37, 50-54.

The balloting takes place

Directions are provided for the design of the ballot. It is to be a rectangular sheet with the words on the top of the paper, *Eligo in Summum Pontificem (I elect you as Supreme Pontiff)*. The paper should be able to be folded twice. After the Cardinal electors have filled in their ballots, each Cardinal elector then proceeds to the altar. He holds up his folded ballot so that it can be seen and says: *I call as my witness Christ the Lord who will be my judge, that my vote is given to the one who before God I think should be elected*. He then places his ballot in the designated receptacle, bows to the altar and returns to his place. After all the ballots are cast, three *Scrutineers*, who have been assigned to count the ballots, begin their work. One of them shakes the receptacle several times to mix up the ballots. The Scrutineers validate there is one vote for each Cardinal present. If there is a discrepancy, the ballots are burned and another balloting is held. If the proper correspondence exists between the ballots cast and the number of Cardinal electors, then the ballots are opened in front of all with all three Scrutineers viewing each ballot and the third Scrutineer reads the ballot out loud so that all can hear. A canonically valid election of a new Pope occurs when one receives two-thirds of the number of ballots cast. After the Scrutineers finish their task of counting the ballots, their results are checked by another group

called *Revisers*. Except for the first afternoon of balloting, this procedure takes place twice in the morning and twice in the afternoon for each day of the Papal Conclave.

If the Cardinal electors are not able to agree on a new Pope after three days, they pause the balloting for a day of prayer, informal conversation and a brief spiritual exhortation provided by a senior Cardinal. The next day the balloting resumes. The norms provide for other periodic days of pause from balloting. A final stipulation provides for a ballot limited to the two persons who have received the most votes in the previous balloting. However, the requirement for a two-thirds majority remains steadfast.

All ballots along with all notes taken by the Cardinal electors are burned.

Universi Dominici Gregis, 62-75.

Habemus papam

When the canonically valid election of a new Pope takes place, the Cardinal Dean, or the Cardinal who is first in order and seniority, asks the consent of the one elected in the following words: *Do you accept your canonical election as Supreme Pontiff?* If the elected one consents, he is then asked: *By what name do you wish to be called?* If by chance the elected one is not yet ordained a bishop, the Episcopal ordination then takes place. Each Cardinal elector approaches the newly elected Pope “to make an act of homage and obedience.” The senior Cardinal Deacon “announces to the waiting people that the election has taken place and proclaims the name of the new Pope, who immediately thereafter imparts the Apostolic Blessing *Urbi et Orbi* from the balcony of the Vatican Basilica.”

Universi Dominici Gregis, 87-89.

The new Papal Ministry begins.