

Choosing a New Pope

Guided by the Holy Spirit

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Choosing a New Pope

About 2,000 years ago, Jesus told Peter he was the rock on which Jesus would build his Church and instructed Peter to tend his sheep. Since Peter, the Catholic Church has been led by more than 260 men we call pope. How were these men selected? How will the next pope be chosen? How has the papal election process changed over time? This pamphlet will explore these historical questions by following what happens when a pope dies or resigns the papacy.

The process of electing a pope has developed over centuries—with some bumps in the road. Today's procedures began to take shape in the Middle Ages, as the cardinals became the pope's most

trusted advisors. Later popes refined the process, most recently through *On Electing the Roman Pontiff (Romano Pontifici Eligendo)*, issued by Paul VI in 1975, and *Of the Lord's Whole Flock (Universi Dominici Gregis)*, issued by John Paul II in 1996. In 2013, because of his rare and surprising resignation, Benedict XVI changed the process slightly.

The rules for picking a pope are the same whether a pope dies or resigns, although, surprisingly, there are no procedures for what to do if a pope is physically or mentally incapacitated in a catastrophic manner and cannot function. Unlike the US Constitution's 25th Amendment, which provides for the removal of an American president, there are no such rules in canon law. Benedict's resignation may give canon lawyers the impetus to explore openly what to do in such difficult circumstances.

THE DEATH OF THE POPE

When a pope dies, there is a formal process to certify his death, carry out his funeral, and ensure that the selection of his successor takes place according to the prescribed procedures. The busiest person during this period is the *camerlengo*, or papal chamberlain.

The camerlengo's first task is to certify that the pope is dead. Traditionally, this included tapping the pope's forehead, perhaps with a small silver hammer, and calling him three times by his first name. No response meant the pope was dead. More precise medical equipment is used today.

The pope's rooms and desk are then locked, phone and fax lines are cut, and the apartment doors are sealed by red ribbons that won't be taken down until the next pope is elected.

INTERREGNUM

The time between the death or resignation of one pope and the election of the next is called the *interregnum*, “between the reign.” The cardinals gather in Rome to follow the instructions for arranging the conclave. The cardinals act only as caretakers for the Church. They cannot take any action reserved for the pope alone, such as naming bishops or calling a general council.

After swearing to follow these guidelines, the cardinals decide how the pope’s body will be available for public viewing, when the funeral will take place, and other details, following directions left by the dead pope in his will. Between four and six days after he dies, the pope is buried along with his broken ring, seal, and copies of his most important statements and decisions. Then, a nine-day period of

mourning called the *novemdiales* begins.

Of course, a wake, funeral, and mourning period do not happen when a pope resigns, though Benedict's ring was defaced with two cuts after he stepped down.

CONCLAVE

The biggest event of the interregnum is the conclave in which the cardinals select the new pope. The cardinals decide when the conclave will start, but the rules state it must be no more than twenty days after the interregnum begins. This means the Vatican staff has about two to three weeks to get ready. Originally, the minimum wait was fifteen days.

The process by which the cardinals acquired the exclusive right to elect the pope is only half as old as the Church. Canon law had allowed other clerics to participate and for the sitting pope to

let his choice for successor be known. In 1059, Nicholas II gave cardinals the leading role in electing popes—in part to keep feuding Romans from making the office more political than spiritual.

The Third Lateran Council (1179) restricted election to the cardinals and established that a man would be pope when two-thirds of the college agreed on the candidate. This removed the prior requirement of a unanimous vote.

But electing a new pope still wasn't always straightforward. For nearly three years after Clement IV died in 1268, there was no pope. Officials in Viterbo, Italy, where the cardinals were meeting, got tired of waiting. They locked the cardinals in a building, tore the roof off to expose them to the elements, and threatened to feed them only bread and water. Gregory X was elected almost immediately.

The Second Council of Lyons (1274)