



The Conclave: History, Rules, and Curiosities about the Election of the Pope

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In the heart of the Vatican, in a place filled with spirituality and mystery, one of the most important and solemn events of the Catholic Church takes place: the conclave. This ancient ritual is activated every time the Apostolic See becomes vacant, that is, when the Pope dies or resigns from the pontificate. During the conclave, the cardinals of the Church gather to elect the new Bishop of Rome, who will become the new Pope, spiritual leader of over a billion faithful worldwide.

The Origins of the Conclave: From Crisis to Institution

The term "conclave" derives from the Latin *cum clave*, meaning "locked with a key." Its historical origin is linked to a period of severe crisis for the Church, culminating in the conclave of **Viterbo (1268-1271)**, the longest in history, lasting a full **33 months**. After the death of Pope Clement IV, divisions among the cardinals prevented the election of a new pontiff. The

citizens of Viterbo, exasperated, went so far as to lock the cardinals in and remove the roof of the voting hall to force them to decide. Only then was Pope **Gregory X** elected.

Before 1274: Free but Chaotic Elections

Before the **Gregorian reform of 1274**, papal elections took place without fixed and unified rules, often in environments open to external pressures and political influences. Although the cardinals were the only ones with the **right to vote since 1059** (thanks to the decree *In Nomine Domini* by Nicholas II), conclaves dragged on for months or even years due to internal rivalries, power struggles, or **interference from monarchs, nobles, and foreign powers**.

The cardinals were not obliged to gather in seclusion, could disperse and return to their seats, and the voting took place in various forms, often without the necessary secrecy. Cases of **corruption, promises of favors, or intimidation** were not uncommon. In some extreme cases, popes were elected under threat or military pressure, as happened on several occasions in the early Middle Ages.

The disorganization and risk of schism, combined with the slowness of the proceedings, led the Church to realize that a **rigorous regulation of the electoral process** was needed, culminating with the *Ubi periculum* by Gregory X.

Ubi periculum (1274): The First Rules of the Conclave

The apostolic constitution *Ubi periculum* introduced fundamental rules, including:

- Seclusion: the cardinals had to remain locked in a secure place, without contact with the outside.
- Food restrictions: after three days without result, food was reduced; after eight, only bread and water.
- Prohibition of communications: external contacts, letters, and messages were forbidden.
- Uniqueness of the seat: the conclave had to be held in the city where the Pope had died.

These measures aimed to speed up the process and prevent political pressures or power games.

The Shortest and Longest Conclaves

If the one in Viterbo was the longest, the shortest conclave in modern history was that of **1939**, lasting less than **24 hours**. In that case, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli was elected **Pope Pius XII** on the third ballot, thanks to unanimous consent and his central position in Vatican diplomacy, on the eve of World War II.

The Current Rules: *Universi Dominici Gregis* (1996)

The rules that today govern the conclave are contained in the apostolic constitution ***Universi Dominici Gregis***, promulgated by **John Paul II in 1996** and subsequently modified by **Benedict XVI** and **Pope Francis**. Here are the main points:

Participants

- Only cardinals under 80 years old can vote.
- The maximum number of electors is 120, as established by *Universi Dominici Gregis*.
However, the Pope can appoint more than 120 cardinal electors: in such a case, if on the date of the vacant seat there are more than 120 eligible cardinals, **all can participate**, even if they exceed the limit. This limit was introduced by **Paul VI** in 1975 with the apostolic constitution *Romano Pontifici Eligendo*, but it has been exceeded several times:
 - **John Paul II** exceeded it 4 times between 1988 and 2003.
 - **Benedict XVI** exceeded it 2 times, in 2010 and 2012.
 - **Francis** has exceeded the 120 in **all his consistories**, reaching 140 electors in 2024.In the conclave of 2005 and in that of 2013, **117** cardinal electors participated, without legitimacy issues.

Seclusion and Secrecy

- The cardinals are locked in the Domus Sanctae Marthae and vote in the Sistine Chapel.
- All contact with the outside is prohibited: phones, internet, media, etc.
- Each cardinal takes an oath of secrecy: violation results in automatic excommunication.

Voting

- Four votes are held per day (two in the morning, two in the afternoon).
- A qualified majority of 2/3 is required for a valid election.

The Smoke

- The ballots are burned: black smoke indicates a null vote, white smoke announces the election of the new Pope.

The Election and Announcement

- The new Pope accepts the election and chooses a name.
- He is announced with the famous *Habemus Papam* from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica.

Who Can Be Elected Pope?

According to doctrine and canon law, any baptized Catholic man can be elected Pope. It is not mandatory for him to be a cardinal or bishop. If he is not a bishop, he must be ordained a bishop immediately after acceptance.

But in Practice?

- For centuries, only cardinal bishops have been elected.
- A layman has not been elected for many centuries: the last case dates back to the Middle Ages.
- Example: Pope Gregory X (1271) was not a cardinal at the time of election.

In theory, therefore, a Catholic layman can be elected, but in modern reality, it is highly unlikely for pastoral, organizational, and geopolitical reasons.

Curiosities about the Conclave

- Cardinals cannot vote for themselves, but they can be elected.
- Some cardinals have refused election, like Saint Philip Neri.
- The most expensive conclave was that of 2005, with an impressive logistical organization.
- All cardinal electors stay in the same residence, but they cannot communicate except in official sessions.

The 2025 Conclave: A Historic Moment

After the death of Pope Francis on **April 21, 2025**, the Church initiated the conclave on **May 7, 2025**. This event marks an epochal transition, being the first conclave of the 21st century to

take place with over **133 cardinal electors**, far exceeding the historical limit of 120 set in 1975 by Paul VI.

The current College of Cardinals reflects a deeply globalized and pluralistic Church, with significant representation from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, a tangible sign of the Church's universal mission.

The central themes of this conclave include the reform of the Curia, strengthening ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, the role of women in ecclesial life, the fight against abuse, as well as the ethical and moral challenges posed by new technologies and the environmental crisis.

As always, the world watches this moment of discernment with attention and hope, guiding the cardinals towards the choice of a pastor capable of facing the challenges of our time with courage, humility, and faith.

An Ancient Rite Projected into the Future

The conclave is much more than a simple election: it is an act of faith, a tradition that connects the Church of the origins with the modern one. Each conclave is a historical moment, full of anticipation and prayer, in which the Church seeks, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the most suitable person to lead it in the present times.

In a constantly evolving world, the conclave remains one of the few moments where spirituality, silence, and discernment merge into a decision-making process as solemn as it is mystical.