

Electing the new pope: Papal historian explains

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Dr Rebecca Rist, Senior Lecturer in History, is a specialist in the History of the Papacy. She has appeared in the media, including on Sky News talking about the Pope's resignation, the process of voting in and installing a new Pope and the front runners in the election.

Here she explains the events and offers a historical context to the very unusual situation...

History and significance of bringing the Conclave forward

On 11 February Benedict XVI offered his resignation and stepped down as pope on 28 February. He is keen to ensure there is a new pope by Easter (31 March). Now the cardinals must pick a successor. Conclave, the meeting which will bring the 116 cardinals together to elect a new pope, starts on Tuesday 12 March.

Benedict XVI will not be directly involved in his successor's selection and is keen to distance himself from any idea of holding power behind the papal throne. Yet he will have indirect influence over his successor because he has appointed 67 of the 116 cardinals that will decide the next pope.

Process of voting

A papal Conclave is a meeting of the College of Cardinals to elect the new pope. In the very early days of the Church the pope was often elected merely by the consensus of the clergy and laity around Rome. During the Medieval period European kings, emperors and the Roman aristocracy often had too much influence over papal elections, so in 1059 a special body known as the College of Cardinals was deputed to become the sole body for electing the pope. Much more recently, in 1970 it was ruled that cardinals have to be under 80 to have a vote in papal elections.

There are three types of cardinals who elect: cardinal bishops, cardinal priests and cardinal deacons. The Conclave is held in secret but the process of voting for a new pope is a relatively straightforward one. Approximately one hundred and twenty cardinals come together in Consistory (an ecclesiastical council) and meet in the Sistine Chapel inside Vatican City to elect a new pope who needs a two-thirds majority plus one to be successful. The Dean of the College of the Cardinals will normally begin the Conclave proceedings. Following tradition, if the cardinals have not yet reached a decision black smoke will issue from a chimney in the Vatican but when they have, the smoke will be white.

Block voting

The Italians have currently approximately 21 out of the total of 116 votes so if they were to vote as a block they could probably not elect one of their own but would be very important in making the final decision. However, historically cardinals have hardly ever voted as a block. The US cardinals are also very influential due to their large numbers but it is highly unlikely any of them will be elected pope. Someone who is a likely candidate is called 'papabile' but it is an old saying that the man who goes into the Conclave as pope comes out as a cardinal!

Historically it has sometimes proved difficult for the cardinals to elect a new pope. When Gregory XII abdicated in 1415 it took two years before

they could decide on his successor Martin V. But there are also precedents for swift action. When Pope Celestine V resigned in December 1294, Pope Boniface VIII was immediately elected that same month.

Front runners

Likely cardinals to succeed Benedict XVI include:

- Cardinal Marc Ouellet, formerly archbishop of Quebec (Canada). Relatively young and currently boss of the Congregation for Bishops in Rome, he is seen as an 'insider' who wields a lot of power and influence within the Vatican.
- Cardinal Angelo Scola, archbishop of Milan. As an Italian he might be the best choice to clean up the bureaucracy of the Vatican, particularly in the wake of the recent scandal over the pope's butler.
- Cardinal Leonardo Sandri (Argentina). Currently Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. If the cardinals are looking for a pope from South America (where Catholicism is strong) then he would be a good choice.
- Cardinal André Vingt-Trois, archbishop of Paris. He is another major European contender besides Scola.
- Cardinal Odilo Scherer, archbishop of San Paolo. Other possible South American candidates include the archbishop of Honduras and the archbishop of Havana.
- Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, archbishop of Genoa, another Italian who is currently president of the Italian Bishops Conference.
- Cardinal Peter Turkson, archbishop of Cape Coast (Ghana). If the cardinals are looking for an African pope (the Church is currently growing fast in Africa) then Turkson, who is relatively young, would be a good choice. Another African possibility is

Cardinal Francis Arinze (Nigeria) but he is now seen by insiders as a less likely candidate because he is much older.

- Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, archbishop of Manila (Philippines).
- An Asian pope is also a possibility.

Installation of the new pope

Once the new pope has been elected a special mass will be celebrated in the Vatican at which a papal inauguration ceremony will be held. In the medieval period there was also a papal coronation ceremony with the pope being crowned with a papal tiara. The first pope to be crowned in this way was Pope Nicholas II (1058-1061) but since the inauguration of Pope John Paul I this has been dropped.

The modern papal inauguration takes place during the mass, usually in the piazza outside Saint Peter's Basilica and includes the formal bestowal of the pallium, a special woollen scarf which is placed around the shoulders of the pope as a symbol of his universal jurisdiction over the Church. The new pope is also given a special ring called the Ring of the Fisherman which signifies that he is the direct successor of St Peter who was both fisherman and disciple.

Certain senior cardinals who represent the whole College of [Cardinals](#) then pay homage to the new pope. After the mass and the ceremony of inauguration the new pope will be met by heads of state and various delegations from all over the world inside St Peter's Basilica and in the following days he will visit the other major basilicas and churches around Rome.

Antipopes

Benedict XVI has retired to an apartment within Vatican City, where he can continue a life of study and prayer away from the gaze of the media.

There has been speculation as to whether once a new pope has been elected the fact that Benedict will nevertheless remain in Rome as 'Pope Emeritus' might cause divided loyalties within the Vatican. Historically there have been times of crisis within the Church when opposing camps within the papal curia have set up a rival to the elected pope known as an 'anti-pope'. For example, during the twelfth century there were no fewer than four anti-popes during the pontificate of Alexander III (1159-1181). However, on this occasion it seems that Benedict's retirement from office is actually to make things easier for his successor. One of the reasons for his decision to retire rather than die in office may be that he wants to avoid the situation of his predecessor John Paul II who suffered from Alzheimer's during his last years in office and therefore could not keep effective control over Vatican politics. Benedict may well have thought that he did not want his successor to have to clear up too much chaos from the previous reign as he had to do with John Paul II.

Provided by University of Reading

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