

A Quick **STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE** to How a Pope Is Elected



*U*pon the death of a pope, the world turns its attention to the Vatican. The Church enters a period of mourning before the process of choosing a successor begins (no sooner than 15 days and no later than 20 days after the pope's passing). Cardinals from around the world gather in Rome to prayerfully discern and elect the next leader of the Catholic Church—a process that is rich in history, tradition, and faith. But how does this election take place? Who is involved in the decision, and what are the key steps in selecting the next pope?

Prayer for the New Pope

*O God, Eternal Shepherd,
who governs your flock with unfailing care,
grant in your boundless fatherly love
a pastor for your Church
who will please you by his holiness
and toward us show watchful care.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in
the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever. Amen.*

Step 1:

The Cardinals Gather

It all starts when the pope's seat becomes vacant. The cardinals from all over the world meet in the Vatican for what is called "General Congregations." This is the time to pray, discuss, and prepare for the election, which is known as the conclave.

Step 2:

The Cardinals Celebrate Mass and Pray for the Holy Spirit's Guidance

Before the process begins, the cardinals celebrate Mass together in St. Peter's Basilica, asking the Holy Spirit to guide them.

Step 3:

The Cardinals Enter the Conclave and Secrecy Begins

The voting cardinals—those under 80 years of age—now process into the Sistine Chapel while chanting *Veni Creator Spiritus*, calling the Holy Spirit. They take an oath of secrecy, and then comes a dramatic moment: The Master of Papal Liturgical Celebrations announces "*Extra omnes*"—which means "All out!" Only the voting cardinals remain.

Step 4:

The Cardinal Electors Discuss Potential Candidates

Technically, any baptized male Catholic is eligible to be elected as pope. You don't have to be a cardinal! However, the pope is almost always chosen from among the College of Cardinals. The cardinals weigh all the important qualities carefully, keeping in mind the Church's needs. This process involves both prayerful discernment and practical considerations to select a leader who will guide the Church effectively in the years to come.

Step 5:

The Voting Begins

When it is time to vote, each cardinal writes the name of his choice on a ballot, folds it, and places it in a large chalice. Then, they count the votes. A pope must receive two thirds of the votes from the electors present to be chosen.

Step 6:

Black Smoke Means No Pope

If no candidate reaches the required two-thirds majority, the votes—and any notes the cardinals took during that round—are burned. If no pope is elected, a special mixture is added to make the smoke black.

Step 7:

A Cardinal Receives Two-Thirds Majority

Rounds of voting continue (four rounds each day) until a candidate finally reaches a two-thirds majority.

When this happens, he is asked if he accepts. He can say no. If this were to happen, the voting would resume—but if he were to accept, he chooses a papal name and dresses in white for the first time.

Step 8:

White Smoke Means We Have a New Pope

Now the world gets the big news. We have a new pope! They add a special mixture to the papers and ballots used during that round of voting to produce white smoke. As the smoke rises from the chimney, bells can be heard ringing across Rome.

Step 9:

Habemus Papam!—"We Have a Pope!"

The senior cardinal deacon—called the cardinal Protodeacon—steps out onto the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica and announces, "*Habemus Papam!*" ("We have a new pope!"). The newly elected pope is presented to the world for the first time from the balcony.

Step 10:

The *Urbi et Orbi* Blessing

What is the first thing the new pope does? He blesses the city of Rome and the whole world with the *Urbi et Orbi* blessing.

Join us in praying
for our new pope:

