

How the Conclave works: It's guided by a Rule Book and a Prayer Book

Apr 30, 2025

VATICAN CITY | The conclave to elect a new pope, scheduled to begin May 7, is governed by two texts: A Rule Book, and A Prayer Book. The Rule Book is the apostolic constitution, "Universi Dominici Gregis" ("Shepherd of the Lord's Whole Flock"), which was issued by Saint John Paul II in 1996, and amended by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007, and again in 2013. The Prayer Book is the "Ordo Rituum Conclavis" ("Rites of the Conclave"), which was approved by Saint John Paul II in 1998, but not released until after his death in 2005. If Pope Francis made any adjustments to the rites, they had not been announced as of April 30. The "Ordo Rituum Conclavis," which has prayers in Latin with an Italian translation, begins by noting that the election of a pope "is prepared for and takes place within liturgical actions, and constant prayer." The rites of the Conclave begin with the public "Mass for the election of the Roman pontiff," which is to be celebrated at 10 AM on May 7, in Saint Peter's Basilica. Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, dean of the College of Cardinals, will be the main celebrant. According to the "Ordo," Cardinal Re will begin by praying: "O God, eternal pastor, you who govern your people with a father's care, give your Church a pontiff acceptable to you for his holiness of life and wholly consecrated to the service of your people." The "Mass for the election of the Roman pontiff" is the only rite in the book to be celebrated publicly before the new pope is presented to the world.

After celebrating the morning Mass, the Rule Book calls for the cardinals to gather in the late afternoon in the Pauline Chapel of the Apostolic Palace, and then process into the Sistine Chapel. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the highest-ranking member of the College of Cardinals, who is under the age of 80 and eligible to enter the conclave, addresses the cardinals: "After having celebrated the divine mysteries, we now enter into Conclave to elect the Roman pontiff. The whole Church, united with us in prayer, invokes the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that we elect a worthy pastor of the entire flock of Christ." In a procession behind the cross, the cardinals walk into the Sistine Chapel, singing a litany of saints of the East and West, and a series of invocations to Christ with the refrain, "Save us, Lord." When everyone is in his place in the chapel, the cardinals chant the ancient invocation of the Holy Spirit, "Veni, Creator Spiritus." The cardinals then take an oath to "faithfully and scrupulously observe" the rules for electing a pope. Each swears that if he is elected, he will "faithfully fulfill the Petrine ministry as pastor of the Universal Church, and will strenuously affirm and defend the spiritual and temporal rights, as well as the freedom of the Holy See." They also promise to keep everything having to do with the election secret. When the last cardinal has placed his hand on the Book of the Gospels and sworn the oath, Archbishop Diego Ravelli, Vatican master of liturgical ceremonies, says: "Extra omnes," ordering all those not directly involved in the conclave out of the Sistine Chapel. During their general congregation meetings, the cardinals selected Italian Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa, retired preacher of the papal household who at 90 is not eligible to vote in the conclave, to remain inside the chapel to offer a reflection on their responsibilities in electing a new pope. After the meditation, he and Archbishop Ravelli will leave the chapel. The cardinals decide together whether they will cast one ballot the first evening; traditionally they have done so, burning the ballots with a chemical additive that produces black smoke pouring from the Sistine Chapel chimney. After that, two ballots can be cast each morning and two each afternoon until a candidate garners two-thirds of the votes. On the fourth day, if no one has been elected, the cardinals pause for extended prayer.

Each day of the Conclave, the cardinals recite morning and evening prayer together, and concelebrate Mass. They have time for prayer before each ballot is cast, and before the ballots are counted. As each cardinal places his vote in an urn on a table in front of Michelangelo's fresco of the Last Judgment, he promises that his vote was cast for the candidate he believes deserves to be elected. If the first ballot of the morning or of the afternoon session does not result in an election, a second vote begins immediately, and the two ballots are burned together. When someone reaches the two-thirds threshold -- 89 votes if, as reported, 133 cardinals enter the conclave -- he will be asked by Cardinal Parolin, "Do you accept your canonical election as supreme pontiff?" Neither the "Ordo" nor the Rule Book provide a formula for the assent, and neither recognizes the possibility that the person elected will refuse. The second question asked is: "With what name do you wish to be called?" If the elected man already is a bishop, once he accepts the office, he "immediately is the bishop of the Church of Rome; the true pope; the head of the college of bishops; and he acquires full and supreme power over the Universal Church." The ballots, along with the cardinals' notes or running tallies of the votes, are burned with a chemical additive to produce white smoke, which announces to the world that there has been a successful election. The cardinals approach the new pope and pay homage to him, then sing the "Te Deum" hymn of thanks to God. Then the senior cardinal deacon, French Cardinal Dominique Mamberti, prefect of the Apostolic Signature, the Holy See's highest court, goes to the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica and declares to the public, "Habemus papam" ("We have a pope").

Conclave begins in the Vatican's Sistine Chapel on March 12, 2013. Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, Argentina was elected on March 13 (fifth ballot); who chose the name Francis.



Inside the Conclave

The world watches with interest as cardinals gather in conclave - literally under lock and key - to elect the next pope. The rarity of the event, the ceremony and secrecy add to the intrigue.

Sistine Chapel

The centuries-old chapel adorned with Michaelangelo's frescoes has been the site of every papal election since 1878.

It's Marble floor is covered with wood. The windows and doors are shut as the Master of Papal Liturgical Ceremonies exclaims, "Extra omnes!" ("Everybody else, out!")

A sweep is performed for electronic devices, even on the electors.

Cardinal Electors

Placing a hand on the Gospels, each one swears to uphold the rules and secrecy of the conclave. Any communication with people outside is forbidden. They may not receive messages or news.

Cardinals under the age of 80 when the see became vacant may vote in the conclave. There are 135 eligible cardinals at this time.

Ballots and Voting

Votes are handwritten and cast individually into special urns. The top of the ballot reads "Eligo in Summun Pontificem" ("I elect as the Supreme Pontiff").

Ballots are counted by three "scrutineers." The work is checked by three "revisers." The ballot counters and verifiers are chosen by lot at the start of the conclave.

One round of voting is expected the first day. Each day after, two votes are taken in the morning and two votes in the afternoon until a successful vote. Should the conclave extend longer than 4 days, the electors will spend additional time in prayer and discussion before voting resumes.

A two-thirds majority is required to elect the new pope.



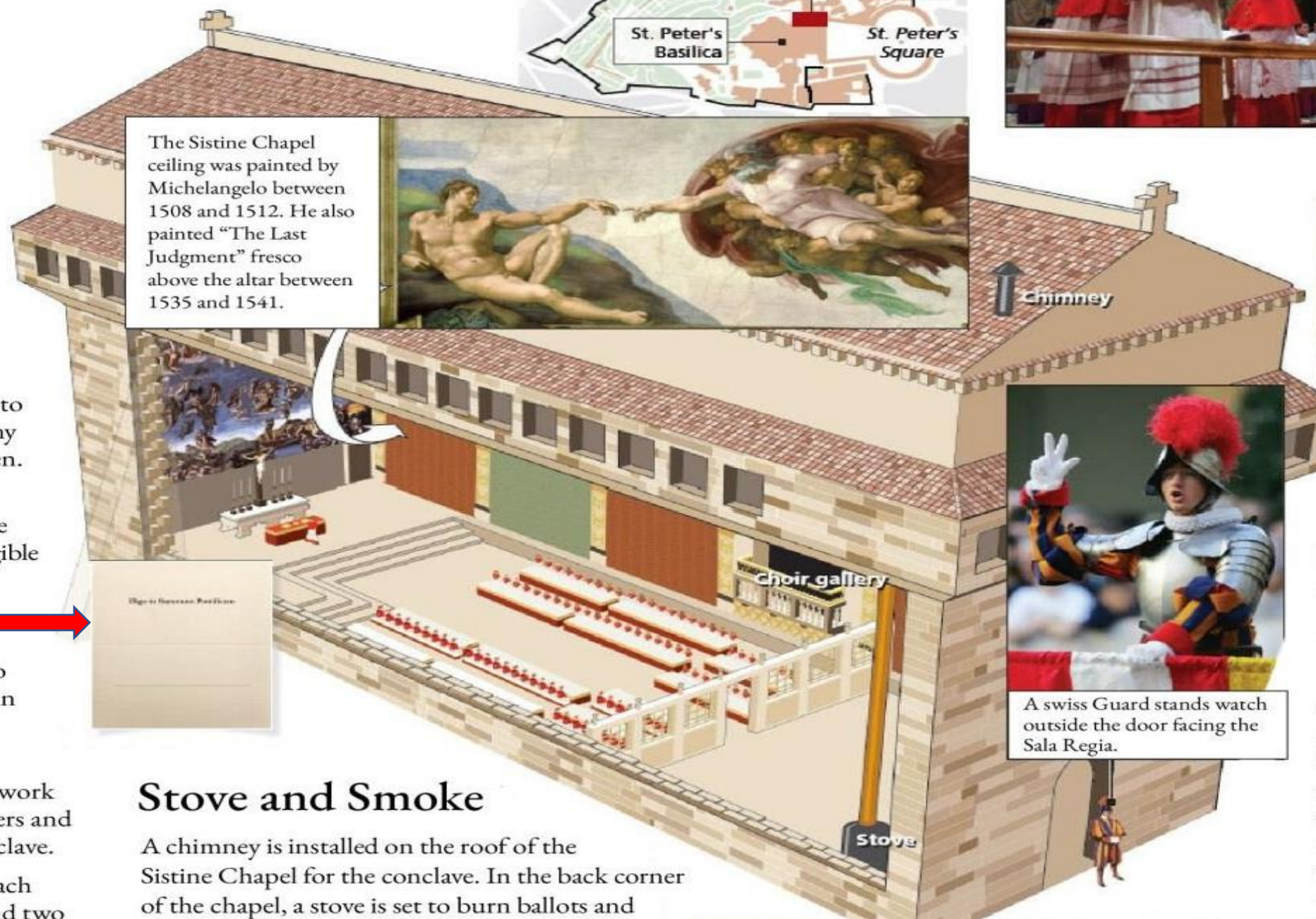
United States
Conference of
Catholic Bishops



Catholic
News
Service



The Sistine Chapel ceiling was painted by Michelangelo between 1508 and 1512. He also painted "The Last Judgment" fresco above the altar between 1535 and 1541.



During the conclave, cardinals stay in the Domus Sanctae Marthae, a guesthouse on the edge of Vatican City. They take short bus rides or walk to their sessions.

How Long Will It Last?

The last seven conclaves lasted only a few days.

Pope	Days	Ballots
Francis	2	5
Benedict XVI	2	4
John Paul II	2	8
John Paul I	1	4
Paul VI	2	6
John XXIII	3	11
Pius XII	1	3



A Swiss Guard stands watch outside the door facing the Sala Regia.

Stove and Smoke

A chimney is installed on the roof of the Sistine Chapel for the conclave. In the back corner of the chapel, a stove is set to burn ballots and related papers, including notes taken by the electors, each morning and afternoon.

If balloting is not successful, the smoke burns black with the help of an added chemical.

If balloting is successful, a chemical is added to produce the celebratory white smoke - the signal that the Church has a new pope.



"Habemus Papam"

The one who is elected is asked if he accepts the election as pope. If he accepts, he chooses the name he will take. From the central balcony of St. Peter's basilica, the senior cardinal deacon proclaims, "Habemus papam!" (We have a pope!), and announces his name. The new pontiff appears on the balcony and imparts his first papal blessing.