Electing a new pope draws on tradition and secrecy

by Alessandro Speciale
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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Benedict XVI will soon become the first pope to resign since 1415, short-circuiting many of the initial stages of electing a new pope. But the Vatican says the transition to a new papacy shouldn't be all that different from normal.

Of course, the traditional rituals associated with confirming the death of a pope and planning his funeral will not be necessary. But the process outlined below, rife with secrecy and tradition, will largely follow centuries-old protocol.

The Interregnum

Pending the election of a new pope, most of the cardinals who lead the Vatican's bureaucracy – the Roman Curia – leave office.

There are three exceptions. The camerlengo, who takes charge of property and money matters. The vicar of Rome, who continues to provide for the pastoral needs of Romans. And the major penitentiary, the official who grants absolutions and dispensations.

Until the conclave to elect the new pope opens, the College of Cardinals meets daily in a "general congregation" presided over by the dean of the college, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, a former Vatican secretary of state under John Paul II. Attendance is optional for cardinals age 80 and over, and they do not vote in the conclave.

The Conclave Opens

The word conclave is derived from the Latin phrase for "with a key."

It was first used by Pope Gregory X in 1274 in a proclamation outlining the procedure for electing a pope in a meeting place that can be securely locked.

The conclave should open 15 days after the pope resigns but could be postponed to 20 days. All cardinals under the age of 80 are eligible to vote for the new pope. Pope Paul VI limited the number of cardinal-electors to 120; currently 118 are eligible.

The cardinals live in seclusion in the Casa Santa Marta, a luxury residence inside the Vatican walls. They meet to vote under Michelangelo's famous ceiling in the Sistine Chapel, adjacent to St. Peter's Basilica.

Once the conclave begins, a cardinal-elector may leave only because of illness or other serious reason accepted by a majority of his fellow cardinals. Everyone associated with the conclave – doctors, nurses, confessors, masters of liturgical ceremonies, sacristans and various priest assistants and housekeeping and catering staff – must swear never to tell anything they learn about the election.

The conclave opens in the morning with a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica. In the afternoon, the cardinals, vested in scarlet robes, walk in procession in order of seniority from the Pauline Chapel in the Apostolic Palace to the Sistine Chapel to the chant of the ninth-century Latin hymn, "Veni, Creator Spiritus."

The cardinals take an oath of secrecy. They swear to accept no interference in the election and to observe the rules set down in the Apostolic Constitution on the election of a pope.

The master of pontifical liturgical celebrations then orders everyone who's not taking part or assisting in the conclave to leave – the doctors, nurses, caterers and others – the room, using the Latin phrase "extra omnes" (all out). Assisted by the undersecretary of state, he closes off the cardinals' hotel and the Sistine Chapel.

Following a meditation by a priest, whom the cardinals have chosen earlier, voting can begin immediately or the next morning.

Voting

The members of the College of Cardinals are divided into the ranks of cardinals-deacon, cardinals-priest and cardinals-bishop. Each day of balloting starts with the selection of three scrutineers who count the votes; three infirmarians who collect the ballots of any cardinals too ill to go to the chapel; and three revisers who review the ballot count. They are chosen by lot with the cardinal-deacon lowest in seniority drawing the lots.

Elaborate precautions are taken to ensure that there is no fraud. Each cardinal, disguising his handwriting, enters the name of his choice on a two-inch-wide card on which is printed at the top the Latin phrase "Eligo in Summum Pontificem" (I elect as Supreme Pontiff). He folds the ballot lengthwise to conceal the name.

The cardinals walk to the altar, one by one in order of precedence, holding the ballot aloft. Each prelate kneels briefly to pray and on rising declares, "I call as my witness Christ the Lord, who will be my judge, that my vote is given to the one whom, before God, I think should be elected." He then places the ballot on a plate, which covers a receptacle, usually a chalice. Lifting the paten, he allows the ballot to drop into the receptacle. The cardinal infirmarians leave the chapel carrying a locked box with a slit top to collect the ballots of sick cardinals.

Counting the Ballots

Once all the cardinals have voted, the first scrutineer mixes the ballots by shaking the receptacle. The third scrutineer counts the still-folded ballots. If the number of ballots is not the same as the number of electors, the ballots are burned and the cardinals immediately vote again.

If the number of ballots is correct, the scrutineers begin the count seated at a table in front of the altar. The first scrutineer unfolds each ballot, silently notes the name written on it and hands it to the second scrutineer, who does the same and hands it on to the third, who reads the name aloud and records it. The cardinals may also keep a tally.

At the end of the count, the scrutineers announce the total number of votes each candidate has received. Any candidate who has received two-thirds of the votes of those present is elected pope. If the total is not divisible by three, the required number of votes for election is two-thirds plus one.

After the results are announced, the third scrutineer threads the ballots together with a needle, which he inserts through the word "eligo" (or "elect") printed on each voting card. He ties a knot at each end and turns the bundle of ballots and the scrutineers' records over to the three revisers to be checked.

If all is in order, the scrutineers, secretary of the conclave and masters of ceremonies burn the ballots and all notes taken by the scrutineers and cardinals in a special stove. Since 1903, the masters of ceremonies have added chemicals to color

the smoke. If the tens of thousands of people waiting in St. Peter's Square see white smoke, they know that the pope has been elected; if they see black smoke, he has not.

The only remaining record of the voting is a document that the camerlengo prepares at the end of the election giving the results of each session. The document is approved by the assisting cardinals, given to the new pope and then placed in a sealed envelope in the archives to be opened only with papal permission.

Breaking an Impasse

If the voting is inconclusive, the cardinals may continue to cast up to four ballots each day – twice in the morning and twice in the afternoon. If they still have not elected a pope after three days, voting is suspended for a day of prayer, informal discussion and a brief spiritual exhortation by the senior cardinal-deacon.

If the impasse continues, there are seven more votes, a suspension and exhortation by the senior cardinal-priest, followed by another seven votes, a suspension and exhortation by the senior cardinal-bishop and a final seven votes.

Pope John Paul II introduced rules in 1996 that the requirement for a two-thirds majority could be waived after 12 days, and the pope may be chosen by an absolute majority. But Benedict canceled this provision in 2007.

Under the new rules, after 12 days, the choice of candidates is limited to the two men who received the most votes in the last round. The two candidates do not vote in this round and, to be elected pope, one needs to achieve a two-thirds majority.

The New Pope

Once the election is decided, the dean of the College of Cardinals asks the winner, "Do you accept your canonical election as supreme pontiff?"

It has been many centuries since the answer was no.

St. Philip Benizi, for one, fled a conclave in 1271 and hid until another candidate was chosen. St. Charles Borromeo declined in the 16th century, and Cardinal Robert Bellarmine declined in 1621.

The new pope is asked by what name he wants to be called. For the past 1,000 years, it has been the custom for the pope to change his name upon being elected. The last to keep his own name was Marcellus II, elected in 1555.

The cardinals make an act of homage and obedience to the new pope and join in a prayer of thanksgiving.

The senior cardinal-deacon then steps out onto the central balcony of St. Peter's Square. He pronounces a Latin formula including the phrase, "Habemus papam (We have a pope)" and announces the name the new pontiff has taken.

The pope appears and gives his first "urbi et orbi" blessing to the city of Rome and the world.