

Explaining the Conclave: How the Catholic Church Elects a New Pope

With the election of Pope Leo XIV, global attention has once again turned to the unique and sacred process by which the Catholic Church chooses a new leader: the Conclave.

The Conclave is a centuries-old tradition governed by strict protocols, spiritual focus, and deep secrecy. Paul Osborne, Media and Communications Director for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, offers this summary of the procedures, based on Vatican sources.

Preparation for the Conclave

The process began with a special Mass, the *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice* ("For the Election of the Roman Pontiff"), celebrated in St Peter's Basilica at 10.00am Rome time on May 7 (6.00pm AEST). Later that day, at 4.30pm Rome time (12.30am AEST, May 8), the 132 Cardinal electors gathered in the Pauline Chapel to pray the Litany of the Saints. They then processed into the Sistine Chapel, where the election would take place.

Inside, each Cardinal took a solemn oath of secrecy and fidelity. Once all non-electors had exited—announced by the phrase *extra omnes*—a reflection was given on the responsibility of choosing a Pope, after which even the preacher and the liturgical master exited. The Cardinals then recited prayers and discussed whether they were ready to proceed.

Voting Process

Voting is held inside the sealed Sistine Chapel. Communication with the outside world is completely cut off. Cardinals may not send or receive messages, use phones, access media, or speak with those outside the Conclave.

A two-thirds majority is required to validly elect a new Pope. If the number of electors is not divisible by three, a further vote is needed. On the first afternoon, a single ballot is cast. On following days, two votes may occur in the morning and two in the afternoon.

Ballots are burned after each voting session. If no Pope is elected, chemicals are added to produce black smoke. White smoke signals a successful election. For those watching from afar, estimated smoke times were provided—including in Australia—via the Vatican's YouTube channel, Vatican Media Live.

If no decision is reached after three days, voting pauses for a day of prayer, dialogue, and a spiritual address by the Cardinal Proto-Deacon.

What Happens When a Pope is Elected?

Once a candidate receives the required majority, the Secretary of the College of Cardinals and the Master of Pontifical Liturgical Celebrations are summoned. The

Cardinal Dean asks two key questions of the chosen candidate: whether he accepts the election, and what name he wishes to take.

Following formal acceptance and documentation, the new Pope immediately assumes full authority over the universal Church. The Conclave then ends, and the Cardinals offer their homage.

The Cardinal Proto-Deacon announces the news to the world from the balcony of St Peter's Basilica: "*Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum; Habemus Papam.*" The new Pope then imparts the Apostolic Blessing *Urbi et Orbi* ("to the City and the World").

Later, the Pope formally takes possession of the Cathedral of the Bishop of Rome—St John Lateran.

The Role of the Smoke

Two stoves in the Sistine Chapel produce the iconic smoke. One burns ballots; the other adds chemicals to signal black or white smoke. This public sign has become a powerful symbol of continuity, anticipation, and unity within the Church.