

The Election Of A Pope

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The Conclave

Not least among the reforms promoted by Pope Paul VI was the revision of the norms for the papal election, published in the decree *Romano Pontifici Eligendo*. During the vacancy of the Holy See the government of the Church is entrusted provisionally to the Cardinals. The most urgent task before them is to arrange for the sealing-off of part of the Vatican, where they can assemble for the express purpose of electing a new Pope. This area is called the Conclave. It is essential to ensure that the election is held in absolute privacy and without fear of intrusion. A swift transformation has to take place in the Vatican before it is ready for the Cardinals to enter the Conclave. Temporary accommodation must be found for them in the labyrinth of apartments and corridors of the Vatican Palace. They will remain enclosed there night and day, without communication with the outside world, until the procedure of the election has been carried out in full. The Sistine Chapel, famed for its wonderful frescoes, must be turned into the election chamber, with individual writing desks arranged around its walls for each of the Cardinal-electors. A large table is placed before the altar, where the votes can be cast and the ballot papers counted. Other tables are positioned in the centre of the Chapel for the assistants, whose services the Cardinals require in the course of the election.

The Electors

After the death of the Pope, the Cardinals who are already present in Rome must wait fifteen full days for the arrival of those who are absent. When a maximum of twenty days has elapsed, however, the Cardinals present are obliged to enter the Conclave and proceed with the election. The right to elect a new Pope belongs exclusively to the Cardinals. The maximum number of Cardinal-electors must not exceed one hundred and twenty. None of them at the moment of entry into the Conclave must have passed his eightieth birthday. Apart from the electors, only a strictly limited number of carefully selected officials and assistants is admitted to the Conclave and they are never present in the Chapel while the voting is in progress. Like the Cardinal-electors, they are bound by a solemn oath never to speak about what takes place in the Conclave. This oath also prohibits the use of cameras, telephones, microphones, tape-recorders, or radio transmitters and receivers throughout the entire duration of the Conclave.

On the day appointed for the opening of the Conclave, the Cardinal-electors assemble in St Peter's Basilica for the celebration of a Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit to implore divine assistance on the election of the new Pope. The entire Church is united with them in this prayer, because the election of the Pope concerns not only the Cardinals, but affects the lives of all Catholics. The Cardinal-electors then go in procession to the Sistine Chapel, accompanied by the few privileged officials and assistants. Orders are given for all unauthorised persons to leave the area of the Conclave immediately. A tour of inspection is made to verify that all openings have been properly sealed off. Without further delay the only entrance to the Conclave is closed, the key turned in the lock and the

bolts drawn on the inside. On the outside, the door is secured by a padlock and chain and the key is taken in custody by a Vatican official.

The Election

The following morning, immediately after Mass and special prayers to the Holy Spirit, the Cardinals proceed to the election, which must be performed exactly in accordance with one of the three modes prescribed in the papal decree. Any attempt to use some other way renders the election invalid from the start. The first mode is by acclamation, that is, when the Cardinal-electors freely, spontaneously and unanimously agree upon one individual as Pope and express their agreement verbally. To be valid, however, this form of election must be accepted by each and every Cardinal participating in the Conclave. The second mode is by delegation, when all the Cardinal-electors entrust the power to elect the new Pope to a select committee, which must be composed of an uneven number of Cardinals, from a minimum of nine to a maximum of fifteen. A necessary condition for the validity of this form of election is that the other Cardinal-electors must swear beforehand to abide by the choice of the committee acting on their behalf. Both the above modes of election have always been considered as extraordinary methods of electing the Pope.

The Secret Ballot

The ordinary way of electing the Pope is by secret ballot. The procedure can be divided into three simple parts: the preparation for the ballot; the casting of the votes; the counting of the votes. The Cardinal-electors take their places in the Sistine Chapel, where two, or three, voting forms are distributed to each elector. Meanwhile the names of nine Cardinals are drawn by lot, three to serve as tellers, three as infirmarians, and three as inspectors. When these preliminaries have been completed the officials and assistants withdraw from the Chapel, leaving the Cardinals entirely on their own. On the desk before each Cardinal is the simple rectangular ballot form on which are printed in Latin the words:

Eligo in Summum Pontificem

That is, 'I elect as Supreme Pontiff...' In the vacant space the Cardinal elector writes the name of him for whom he wishes to vote. A completed form should appear so:

Eligo in Summum Pontificem

-----Fold

Joannem Henricum Newman

Having completed the ballot form, the Cardinal must fold it horizontally so that the name he has written cannot be seen.

The Cardinals then take the ballot forms between the thumb and index finger of their right hand, and holding them aloft they approach the altar according to rank and seniority. Before the altar is the table with a receptacle into which the ballot forms can be dropped. Each Cardinal genuflects before the altar and kneels momentarily in prayer. Then, rising, he pronounces in a clear and audible voice the following oath. 'I call to witness Christ the Lord who will be my judge, that my vote is given to the one whom before God I consider should be elected'. Having taken this oath before his colleagues in the Sacred College, he places the ballot form on the cover of the receptacle, tilts the cover and allows the form to drop into the container. With that he bows to the altar and returns to his place. Special arrangements are made for any sick Cardinals who cannot come to the Sistine

Chapel for the voting. It is the duty of the three Cardinals, who were chosen to act as infirmarians, to go to the cells of the sick Cardinals, so that even these electors may record their votes.

Counting the Votes

When all the Cardinals have voted, the three Cardinals chosen as tellers come forward to count the votes. The first teller shakes up the ballot forms in the receptacle so as to mix them. The third teller then counts them, taking each form separately from the container and depositing them in another empty receptacle prepared to receive them. If for some reason the number of forms does not correspond exactly with the number of electors, then the forms must all be burned and a second vote taken at once. When, however, the number of forms does tally with the number of electors, then the three Cardinal tellers seat themselves at the table and begin to announce the result of the voting. The first teller takes a form, unfolds it, notes the name written on it and passes it to the second teller. In turn he notes the name before passing the form to the third teller, who reads the name out aloud to all the electors, so that they too can record the vote on the printed lists specially provided for that purpose. The third teller also records each name and then inserts a needle and thread through the word 'Eligo' printed on the ballot form. At the conclusion of the counting, a knot is tied at each end of the thread so that there is no danger of the forms being dispersed accidentally. This is the crucial moment when the result of the ballot is announced. If anyone has obtained a majority of two thirds of the votes plus one, then he has been validly elected Pope. But after an inconclusive ballot the Cardinals must proceed immediately to a second one, holding two sessions each morning and evening, until the election is accomplished.

The 'Sfumata'

Whether the voting has resulted in an election, or not, the three Cardinal inspectors come forward and examine the ballot forms and the record of the votes to check the accuracy of the count. When they are satisfied that it has been performed accurately, the ballot forms are all taken to a stove to be burned and in this way the result of the ballot is made known to the people waiting expectantly in St Peter's Square. If the voting has been inconclusive and a new Pope is not yet elected, then the forms are burned together with some chemical material which will produce dense black smoke, easily visible to the crowd. On the other hand, when the ballot has been conclusive and the new Pope is elected, then the forms are burned alone, so that only a thin curl of white smoke is emitted. This is called the 'sfumata' and is the eagerly awaited sign that the Cardinals in the Conclave have accomplished their task.

Acceptance

As soon as the result of a ballot has been declared conclusive, the senior of the Cardinals approaches the Cardinal for whom the necessary number of votes has been cast and in the name of all the electors asks him: 'Do you accept your canonical election as Supreme Pontiff?' At the moment of giving an affirmative answer, thereby accepting his election, the Cardinal becomes Bishop of Rome, true Pope, and Supreme Pontiff, with full authority over the whole Church. He should not shrink from accepting such a high office, but rather see the Will of God in his election by the votes of his fellow Cardinals. The senior Cardinal addresses a second question to the new Pope: 'By what name do you wish to be called?' Following a custom that goes back for many centuries, the Pope announces the new name he wishes to bear throughout his pontificate. The Cardinals then express their homage and obedience to the newly-elected Pope and offer thanks to almighty God for His divine assistance. Meantime the crowd in St Peter's Square know that someone has been elected

Pope. Eagerly they await the announcement, made in Latin by the Senior Cardinal Deacon, which tells them the name of the person elected and the name he has chosen as Pope. Shortly after this solemn announcement, the Holy Father himself comes to the central balcony of St Peter's Basilica to impart his first Apostolic Blessing 'Urbi et Orbi' - to the City of Rome and to the entire World. Another pontificate has already begun.
