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Secret oaths and blacked-out windows: what

happens inside the papal conclave? The conclave that begins in Vatican City on Wednesday is the process of electing the next leader of the world's 1.4 billion Catholics. Shrouded in mystery, with all those involved sworn to secrecy on threat of ex-communication,

what do we know about what goes on behind the sealed doors of the Sistine Chapel? Issued on: 07/05/2025 - 08:22 Modified: 07/05/2025 - 08:24 🕓 8 min

Cardinals - the so-called "Princes of the Church" - will begin voting for the new pope on Wednesday afternoon. AFP - ALBERTO PIZZOLI 4! At stake with the election of a new pope is the direction of the ADVERTISING

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under the frescoed splendour of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican.

Catholic Church, a 2,000-year-old institution with huge global

influence but which is battling to adapt to the modern world, and to

recover its reputation after the scandal of child sexual abuse by



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The 133 cardinals – the so-called "Princes of the Church" – who will vote will gather on Wednesday afternoon

A cardinal (from the Latin cardinalis or principal) is a high dignitary of the Catholic Church chosen by the pope to

assist him in his government. They form the top echelon of the Catholic Church, with their scarlet

Cardinals enter the Sistine Chapel before the start of the 2013 conclave. © AFP The creation of cardinals reflects the political views of the pontiff, who normally uses this power to shape the selection of his own successor. The current College of Cardinals is a diverse group, thanks to Pope Francis appointing figures from far-flung diocese, some gaining a cardinal for the first time – such as Brunei, Mongolia and South Sudan. This diversity means some observers are predicting a protracted process. Vatican affairs specialist Marco Politi told French news agency AFP that, given the unknowns, this conclave could be "the most spectacular in 50 years". Oath of secrecy During the conclave, the cardinals are forbidden from contacting the outside world. They will stay at the Santa Marta guesthouse – although prior to 1996 they slept on camp beds in the Apostolic Palace, which is connected to the Sistine Chapel. → Leaders and believers around the world pay tribute to 'everyone's pope'

All windows in the conclave zone are darkened to guarantee privacy. Ahead of the vote, technicians deactivate all

technological devices installed in recent years in the Sistine Chapel and sweep for secret recording devices.

The day before the conclave they will install "approximately 80 lead seals at all entrances to the perimeter".

The extreme secrecy required extends to these technicians too, and all support staff – cleaners, cooks, doctors

and nurses, drivers and elevator operators. All took an oath of secrecy on Monday. The punishment for breaking

Twelve technicians and maintenance craftspeople will remain inside the Sistine Chapel for the duration of the

conclave, maintaining temperature, lighting and electrical systems, and assisting with ceremonial logistics such

On Wednesday, the day the conclave begins, the cardinal electors take part in a morning mass in St Peter's

Basilica. They will then gather in the Pauline Chapel of the Apostolic Palace at 4:15pm and invoke the assistance

as operating the famous stove – which is now activated by remote control.

Firefighters install the famous chimney ahead of the conclave. AFP - HANDOUT

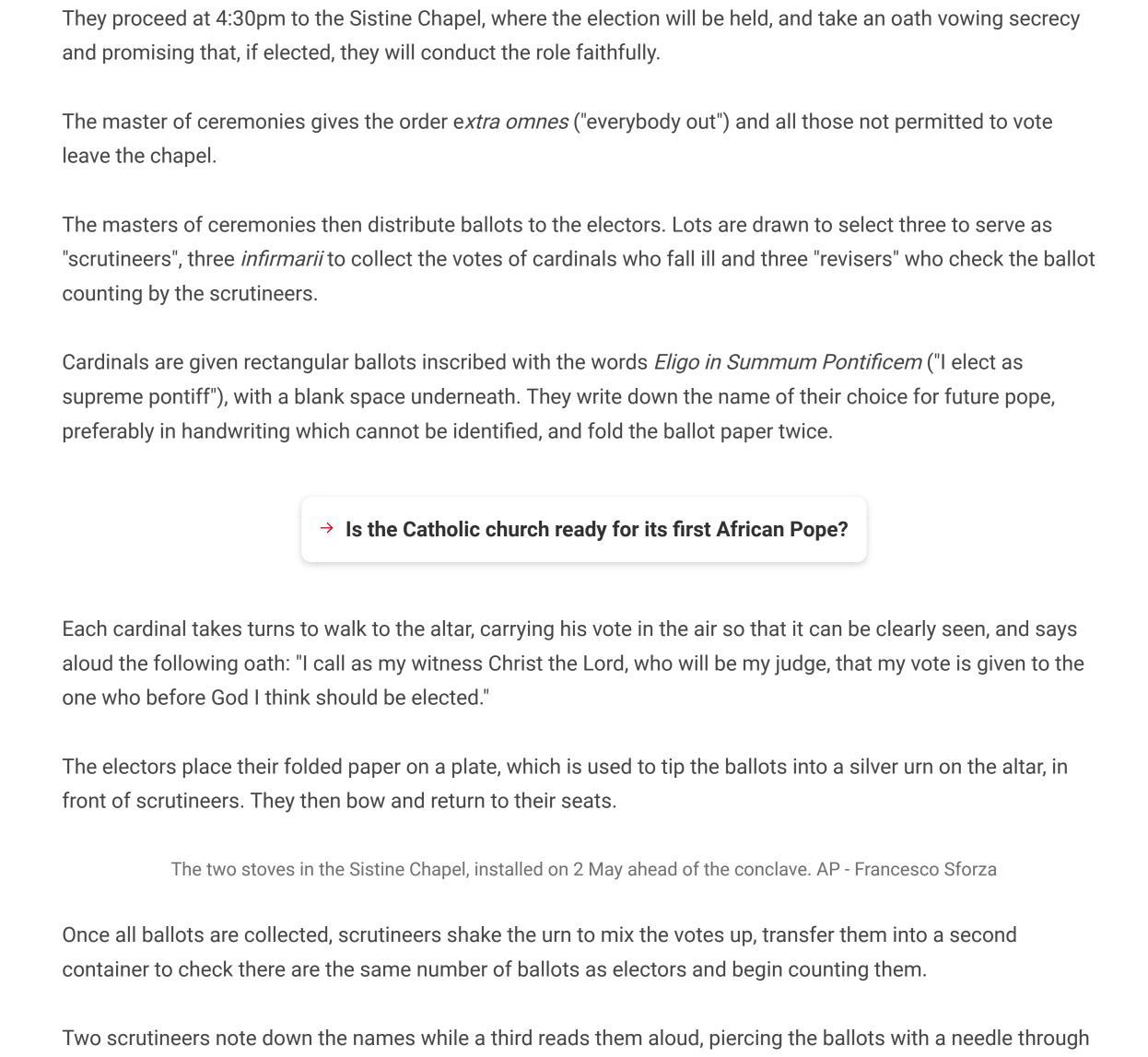
The vote

any mistakes.

to produce the white smoke.

of the Holy Spirit in making their choice.

it? Automatic ex-communication.



the word *Eligo* and stringing them together. The revisers then double-check that the scrutineers have not made

If no one has secured two-thirds of the votes, there is no winner and the electors move straight on to a second

The ballots and any handwritten notes made by the cardinals are then destroyed, burnt in a stove in the chapel. It

The smoke is turned black or white through the addition of chemicals – potassium perchlorate, anthracene (a

If voting continues for three days without a winner, there is a day of prayer, reflection and dialogue. If after

If the cardinals reach a fourth pause with no result, they can agree to vote only on the two most popular

This photo from 2013 shows the 'Room of Tears', a small room next to the Sistine Chapel with the clothes of the next pope

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component of coal tar) and sulfur to produce black smoke, or potassium chlorate, lactose and chloroform resin

round. There are two pairs of votes per day, morning and afternoon, until a new pope has been elected.

emits black smoke if no pope has been elected and white smoke if there is a new pontiff.

another seven ballots there is no winner, there is another day of pause.

candidates, with the winner requiring a clear majority.

displayed - in three different sizes. AFP - -

Pontiff?"

funeral.

been elected.

(with newswires)

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his corpse and have it make decisions.

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elect a new successor of St Peter. Do not mock us."

In 2013, the conclave lasted 27 hours, and in 2005 it was 26 hours. The shortest on record took place in 1503, when it took cardinals just 10 hours to elect Pope Pius III. As for the longest, in the 13th century it took almost three years, beginning n 1268 - 1,006 days to be exact - to choose Pope Clement IV's successor. From late 1269 the cardinals allowed themselves to be locked in to try to reach a decision. When they still hadn't managed this by June 1270, frustrated locals tore the roof off in a bid to speed things along - inspired by a quip by an English cardinal that without the roof, the Holy Spirit could descend unhindered.

When a cardinal is elected pope, the masters of ceremonies and other non-electors are brought back into the

Sistine Chapel and the cardinal dean asks the winner: "Do you accept your canonical election as Supreme

As soon as he gives his consent, he becomes pope - and is free to celebrate, as John Paul II did in 1978,

Conclaves have seen their share of controversy over the centuries. This year, United States President Donald

Trump last week posted an Al-generated image of himself dressed as the pope on his Truth Social platform, after

The New York State Catholic Conference wrote in a post on X: "There is nothing clever or funny about this image,

Mr President. We just buried our beloved Pope Francis and the cardinals are about to enter a solemn conclave to

Last week, France's President Emmanuel Macron was accused by Italian media of attempted interference in the

conclave, after he held a series of meetings with cardinals and Church officials while in Rome for Pope Francis's

→ Wait for Vatican white smoke fires up social media

reportedly walking around pouring Champagne for the cardinals and singing Polish folk songs.

joking that he would be his own first choice for the next pontiff, drawing the ire of the Church.

Officers and employees of the conclave take the oath of secrecy. AFP - HANDOUT In 2013, so convinced were they of his success, upon sight of the famous white smoke signal the Italian bishops' conference sent out a press release congratulating Italian Cardinal Angelo Scola – when Pope Francis had just

In the days leading up to the conclave, Italian newspapers openly promoted Scola as the next pope, appearing to

have missed the warning contained in a traditional Italian saying that front-runners at a papal conclave are often

In 1241, when the conclave was dragging on, the head of Rome's government locked the cardinals into a

According to Frederic Baumgartner in his Behind Locked Doors: A History of the Papal Elections, the cardinals

only reached a decision - electing Celestine IV - after one of them died and the Romans threatened to exhume

dilapidated building and refused to clean the lavatories or provide doctors for those who fell ill.

disappointed: "He who enters a conclave as a pope, leaves it as a cardinal."

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