

Catholic Encyclopedia - Conclaves

(Latin *cum*, with, and *clavis*, key; a place that may be securely closed)

The closed room or hall specially set aside and prepared for the [cardinals](#) when [electing a pope](#); also the assembly of the [cardinals](#) for the canonical execution of this purpose. In its present form the conclave dates from the end of the thirteenth century. Earlier methods of filling the See of Peter are treated in the article [PAPAL ELECTIONS](#). In this article will be considered: (I) the history of the actual method of papal election; (II) the ceremonial itself.

History of the conclave

In 1271 the [election](#) that ended with the choice of [Gregory X](#) at [Viterbo](#) had lasted over two years and nine months when the local authorities, weary of the delay, shut up the [cardinals](#) within narrow limits and thus hastened the desired [election](#) (Raynald, Ann. Eccl., ad ad. 1271). The new [pope](#) endeavoured to obviate for the future such [scandalous](#) delay by the [law](#) of the conclave, which, almost in spite of the [cardinals](#), he [promulgated](#) at the fifth session of the [Second Council of Lyons](#) in 1274 ([Hefele](#), Hist. des Conciles, IX, 29). It is the first occasion on which we meet with the word *conclave* in connection with [papal elections](#). (For its use in [English literature](#) see Murray's "Oxford Dictionary", s.v., and for its [medieval](#) use [Du Cange](#), Glossar. med. et infimæ Latinitatis, s.v.) The provisions of his Constitution "Ubi Periculum" were stringent. When a [pope](#) died, the [cardinals](#) with him were to wait ten days for their absent brethren. Then, each with a single servant, lay or cleric, they were to assemble in the palace where the [pope](#) was at his death, or, if that were impossible, the nearest city not under [interdict](#), in the [bishop's](#) house or some other suitable place. All were to assemble in one room (*conclave*), without partition or hanging, and live in common. This room and another retired chamber, to which they might go freely, were to be so closed in that no one could go in or out unobserved, nor anyone from without speak secretly with any

cardinal. And if anyone from without had aught to say, it must be on the business of the election and with the knowledge of all the cardinals present. No cardinal might send out any message, whether verbal or written, under pain of excommunication. There was to be a window through which food could be admitted. If after three days the cardinals did not arrive at a decision, they were to receive for the next five days only one dish at their noon and evening meals. If these five days elapsed without an election, only bread, wine, and water should be their fare. During the election they might receive nothing from the papal treasury, nor introduce any other business unless some urgent necessity arose imperilling the Church or its possessions. If any cardinal neglected to enter, or left the enclosure for any reason other than sickness, the election was to go on without him. But his health restored, he might re-enter the conclave and take up the business where he found it. The rulers of the city where the conclave was held should see to it that all the papal prescriptions concerning enclosure of the cardinals were observed. Those who disregarded the laws of the conclave or tampered with its liberty, besides incurring other punishments, were *ipso facto* excommunicated.

The stringency of these regulations at once aroused opposition; yet the first elections held in conclave proved that the principle was right. The first conclave lasted only a day and the next but seven days. Unfortunately there were three popes in the very year succeeding the death of Gregory X (1276). The second, Adrian V, did not live long enough to incorporate in an authoritative act his openly expressed opinion of the conclave. Pope John XX lived only long enough to suspend officially the "Ubi Periculum". Immediately the protracted elections recommenced. In the eighteen years intervening between the suspension of the law of the conclave in 1276 and its resumption in 1294 there were several vacancies of from six to nine months; that which preceded the election of Celestine V lasted two years and nine months. About the only notable act of the latter pope was to restore the conclave. Boniface VIII confirmed the action of his predecessor and ordered the "Ubi Periculum" of Gregory X to be incorporated in the canon law (c. 3, in VI^o, I, 6), since which time all papal elections have taken place in conclave. Pope Gregory XI in 1378 empowered the cardinals (for that occasion only) to proceed to an election outside of conclave, but they did not do so. The Council of

[Constance](#) (1417) modified the rules of the conclave to such an extent that the [cardinals](#) of the three "obediences" took part in it as well as six [prelates](#) from each of the five nations. This precedent (which however resulted happily in the [election](#) of the Roman, [Martin V](#)) is perhaps the reason why [Julius II](#) (1512), [Paul III](#) (1542), [Pius IV](#) (1561), and [Pius IX](#) (1870) provided that in case of their death during an [ecumenical council](#) the [election](#) of the new [pope](#) should be in the hands of the [cardinals](#), not in those of the [council](#). [Pius IV](#) by the [Bull](#) "In Eligendis" (1562) provided that the [election](#) might take place either in or out of the conclave, but this was revoked by [Gregory XIII](#). This liberty of action is found again in the legislation (1798) of [Pius VI](#) (Quum nos superiore anno) which leaves it in the power of the [cardinals](#) to modify the rules of the conclave touching enclosure, etc. Again [Pius IX](#) by the [Bull](#) "In hac sublimi" (23 August, 1871) allowed a majority of the [cardinals](#) to dispense with the traditional enclosure. Other important documents of [Pius IX](#) dealing with the conclave are his Constitutions "Licet per Apostolicas Litteras" (8 September, 1874) and "Consulturi" (10 October, 1877), also his "Regolamento da osservarsi dal S. Collegio in occasione della vacanza dell'Apostolica Sede" (10 January, 1878).

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As a matter of fact these precautions, taken in view of the danger of interference by secular governments, have so far been unnecessary, and [elections of popes](#) take place as they always did since the [law](#) of the conclave became finally effective. Many [popes](#) have legislated on this subject, either to confirm the actions of their predecessors or to define (or add to) previous legislation. [Clement V](#) decreed that the conclave must take place in the diocese in which the [pope](#) dies (Ne Romani, 1310) and also that all [cardinals](#), whether [excommunicated](#) or [interdicted](#), provided they were not deposed, should have the [right](#) to vote. [Clement VI](#) (1351) permitted a slight amelioration in the fare and in the strict practice of common life. In the sixteenth century [Julius II](#) (1505) by the [Bull](#) "Cum tam divino" declared invalid any [simoniacal election of a pope](#). Following the example of [Pope Symmachus](#) (499), [Paul IV](#), by the [Bull](#) "Cum Secundum" (1558), denounced and forbade all cabals and intrigues during the lifetime of a [pope](#). The aforesaid Constitution of [Pius IV](#) "In Eligendis" (1562) is a codification and re-enactment of all the [laws](#) pertaining to the conclave since the time of [Gregory X](#). In

it he insists forcibly on the enclosure, which had come to be rather carelessly observed. The finally directive legislation on the conclave is that of [Gregory XV](#). In his short reign (1621-1623) he published two [Bulls](#), "*Æterni Patris*" (1621), and "*Decet Romanum Pontificem*" (1622), followed by a *Cæremoniale* for the [papal election](#) (Bullar. Luxemb., III, 444 sqq.). Every detail of the conclave is described in these documents. Subsequent legislation has either confirmed these measures, e.g. the "*Romani Pontificis*" of [Urban VIII](#) (1625), or regulated the expenditure of money on the [papal](#) obsequies, e.g. the [Brief](#) of [Alexander VIII](#) (1690), or determined their order, e.g. the "*Chirografo*" of [Clement XII](#) (1732). The more recent legislation of [Pius VI](#), [Pius VII](#), and [Pius IX](#) provides for all contingencies of interference by [secular powers](#). [Pius VI](#) (who designated a [Catholic](#) country in which the majority of the [cardinals](#) happened to be) and [Pius IX](#) (who left the matter to the judgment of the [Sacred College](#)) allowed the widest liberty as to the place of the conclave.

Ceremonial of the conclave

Immediately on the death of a [pope](#) the [cardinal camerlengo](#) who, as representative of the [Sacred College](#), assumes charge of the [papal](#) household, verifies by a judicial act the death of the pontiff. In the presence of the household he strikes the forehead of the dead [pope](#) three times with a silver mallet, calling him by his [baptismal name](#). The fisherman's ring and the [papal](#) seals are then broken. A notary draws up the act which is the legal evidence of the [pope's](#) death. The obsequies last nine days. Meanwhile the [cardinals](#) have been notified of the impending [election](#) and those resident in [Rome](#) (*in Curia*) await their absent brethren, assisting in the meantime at the functions for the deceased pontiff. All [cardinals](#), and they alone, have the [right](#) to vote in the conclave; they must, however, be legitimately appointed, have the use of reason, and be present in person, not through a [procurator](#) or by letter. This right is acknowledged even if they are subject to [ecclesiastical](#) censures (e.g. [excommunication](#)), or if the solemn ceremonies of their "creation" have yet to be performed. During the aforesaid nine days, and until the [election](#) of a successor, all [cardinals](#) appear with uncovered [rochets](#),

just as all have canopies over their seats at the conclave, to show that the supreme authority is in the hands of the whole College. The [cardinal camerlengo](#) is assisted by the heads of the three [cardinalitial](#) orders, known as the "Capita Ordinum" ([cardinal-bishops](#), [-priests](#), [-deacons](#)). There are frequent meetings, or "congregations", of these four [cardinals](#) to determine every detail both of the obsequies of the [pope](#) and of the preparations for the conclave. All matters of importance are referred to the general congregations, which since 1870 are held in the [Vatican](#). The [cardinal](#) dean (always the [Bishop](#) of [Ostia](#)) presides over these congregations, in which the [cardinals](#) take rank and precedence from the [date](#) of their elevation to the purple. Formerly they had also to provide for the government of the [Papal States](#) and to repress frequent disorders during the interregnum. In the first of these congregations the various Constitutions which govern the conclave are read and the [cardinals](#) take an [oath](#) to observe them. Then, in the following days, the various officers of the conclave, the conclavists, confessors, and physicians, servants of various kinds, are examined or appointed by a special commission. Each [cardinal](#) has a [right](#) to take into the conclave a secretary and a servant, the secretary being usually an [ecclesiastic](#). In case of illness a third conclavist may be allowed, with agreement of the general congregation. All are equally sworn to secrecy and also not to hinder the [election](#). After the conclave certain honorary distinctions and pecuniary emoluments are awarded to the conclavists.

Meanwhile a *conclave*, formerly a large room, now a large part of the Vatican palace, including two or three floors, is walled off, and the space divided into apartments, each with three or four small rooms or cells, in each of which are a crucifix, a bed, a table and a few chairs. Access to the conclave is free through one door only, locked from without by the Marshal of the Conclave (formerly a member of the Savelli, since 1721 of the Chigi, [family](#)), and from within by the [cardinal camerlengo](#). There are four openings provided for the passage of food and other necessities, guarded from within and without, on the exterior by the authority of the marshal and major-domo, on the interior by the [prelate](#) assigned to this [duty](#) by the three [cardinals](#) mentioned above, representative of the three [cardinalitial](#) orders. Once the conclave begins the door is not again opened until the [election](#) is announced, except to admit a [cardinal](#) who is late in

arriving. All communication with the outside is strictly forbidden under pain of loss of office and *ipso facto* excommunication. A cardinal may leave the conclave in case of sickness (certified under oath by a physician) and return; not so a conclavist. It may be noted at once, with Wernz, that a papal election held outside of a properly organized conclave is canonically null and void.

Within, the cardinals live with their conclavists in the cells. Formerly every cardinal had to provide his own food, which was carried in state by his men-in-waiting to one of the four openings nearest the cell of the prelate. Since 1878 the kitchen is a part of the conclave. Though all meals are taken in private they are served from a common quarter, but great care is taken to prevent written communication by this way. The cells of the cardinals are covered with cloth, purple if they are of the last pope's "creation", green if not. When they wish to be undisturbed they close the door of their cell, the frame-work of which is in the shape of a St. Andrew's cross. The conclave opens officially on the evening of the tenth day after the pope's decease, unless another day has been assigned. Every precaution is observed to exclude those who have no right within the enclosure, and also unnecessary communication with the outside. Papal legislation has long since forbidden the once customary "capitulations", or ante-election agreements binding on the new pope; it is also forbidden to cardinals to treat of the papal succession among themselves during the pope's lifetime; the pope may, however, treat of the matter with the cardinals. Absolutely necessary modifications of the conclave legislation, during the conclave itself, are temporary only. All true cardinals, as stated, may enter the conclave, but those only who have received deacon's orders have a right to vote, unless they have received a special indult from the late pope. Cardinals who have been preconized, but not yet elevated to the purple, are entitled by a decision of St. Pius V (1571) both to be present and to vote.

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Including the cardinals, prelates, and conclavists, there are perhaps two hundred and fifty persons in the enclosure. The government of the conclave is in the hands of the cardinal camerlengo and of the three representative cardinals who succeed one another in order of seniority every three days. About seven or eight o'clock on the morning of

the eleventh day the **cardinals** assemble in the Pauline Chapel and assist at the Mass of the **cardinal** dean. Formerly they wore the special garment of the conclave, called the *crocea*. They receive **Communion** from the hands of the **cardinal** dean, and listen to a Latin allocution on their **obligations** to select the most worthy **person** for the Chair of Peter. After Mass they retire for a few moments, and then assemble in the Sistine Chapel, where the actual voting takes place. There six candles are lighted on the altar on which rest the **paten** and **chalice** to be used in voting. Over the chair of each **cardinal** is a baldachinum. The **papal** throne is removed. Before each chair is also a small writing desk. When ready to vote they enter the Sistine Chapel accompanied by their conclavists bearing their portfolios and writing materials. **Prayers** are said by the **bishop sacristan**; the ballots are distributed and then all are excluded except the **cardinals**, one of whom bolts the door.

Though since **Urban VI** (1378-89) none but a **cardinal** has been **elected pope**, no law reserves to the **cardinals** alone this right. Strictly speaking, any male **Christian** who has reached the use of reason can be chosen — not, however, a **heretic**, a **schismatic**, or a **notorious simonist**. Since 14 January, 1505 (**Julius II**, "Cum tam divino") a **simoniacal election** is canonically invalid, as being a **true** and indisputable act of **heresy** (Wernz, "Jus Decret.", II, 658, 662; see "Hist. Pol. Blätter", 1898, 1900, and Sägmüller, "Lehrbuch d. Kirchenrechts", 1900, I, 215).

There are four possible forms of **election**: *scrutinium*, *compromissum*, *accessus*, *quasi-inspiratio*. The usual form is that of *scrutinium*, or secret ballot, and in it the successful candidate requires a two-thirds vote exclusive of his own. When there is a close vote, and only then, the ballot of the **pope-elect**, which, like all the others, is distinguishable by a text of Scripture written on one of its outside folds, is opened to make sure that he did not vote for himself. Each **cardinal** deposits his vote in the **chalice** on the altar and at the same time takes the prescribed **oath**: "Testor Christum Dominum qui me judicaturus est me eligere quem secundum Deum iudice eligi debere et quod idem in accessu præstabo"—"I call to witness the Lord Christ, Who will be my judge, that I am electing the one whom according to God I think ought to be elected",

etc. (For the form of the [oath](#) see Lucius Lector, "Le Conclave", 615, 618.) The ballot reads: "Ego, Cardinalis N., eligo in summum Pontificem R. D. meum D. Card. N."

For this [election](#) by secret ballot three [cardinals](#) (*scrutatores*) are chosen by lot each time to preside over the operation of voting, three others (*revisores*) to control the count of their colleagues, and still three others (*infirmarii*) to collect the ballots of the sick and absent [cardinals](#). If the sick [cardinals](#) cannot attend the balloting, then the three *infirmarii* go to their cells and bring back their votes in a box to the three [cardinals](#) presiding, who count them and put them in the [chalice](#) with the others. Then, all the ballots having been shaken up and counted, if the number agrees with the number of electors, the [chalice](#) is brought to the table and the ballots, on the outside of which appear the names of the candidates, are passed from hand to hand to the third [cardinal](#) who reads the names aloud. All present are provided with lists on which the names of all the [cardinals](#) appear, and it is customary for the [cardinals](#) to check off the votes as they are read. Then the three [cardinal](#) revisors verify the result which is proclaimed as definite.

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If, upon the first ballot, no candidate receives the [necessary](#) two-thirds vote, recourse is often had to the form of voting known as *accessus*. At the [election](#) of Pius X (Rev. des Deux Mondes, 15 March, 1904, p. 275) the [cardinal](#) dean did not allow the *accessus*, though it is a recognized usage of conclaves, regulated by Gregory XI, designed primarily to hasten [elections](#), and usually considered to favour the chances of the candidate who has the most votes. It consists practically of a second ballot. All use the ordinary blanks again, with this difference, that if the elector wishes his vote to count for his first choice he writes *Accedo nomini*; if he changes his vote he introduces the name of his latest choice. Then the two series of ballots have to be compared and identified by the text on the reverse face of the ballot, so as to prevent a double vote for the same candidate by any elector. When the required two-thirds are not obtained, the ballots are consumed in a stove whose chimney extends through a window of the Sistine Chapel. When there is no [election](#), straw is mixed with the ballots to show by its thick smoke (*sfumata*) to those waiting outside that there has been no [election](#). There

are always two votes taken every day, in the morning and in the evening; they occupy from two to three hours each. When the voting is over one of the [cardinals](#) opens the door outside of which are gathered the conclavists, and all retire to their cells. Other forms of [election](#), made almost impossible by the legislation of [Gregory XV](#), are known as quasi-inspiration and compromise. The former supposes that before a given session there had been no agreement among the [cardinals](#) and that then one of the [cardinals](#), addressing the assembly, proposes the name of a candidate with the words *Ego eligo* (I elect, etc.), whereupon all the [cardinals](#), as though moved by the [Holy Spirit](#), proclaim aloud the same candidate, saying *Ego eligo*, etc. An [election](#) by compromise supposes that after a long and hopeless contest the [cardinals](#) unanimously delegate a certain number of their body to make a choice. It has not been employed since the fourteenth century.

When a candidate has obtained the required two-thirds vote in a scrutiny or ballot (the choice, since [Adrian VI](#), 1522, falling on one present and invariably on an [Italian cardinal](#)), the [cardinal](#) dean proceeds to ask him whether he will accept the [election](#) and by what name he wishes to be [known](#). Since the time of [John XII](#) (955-64; Sägmüller says [Sergius IV](#), 1009-1012) each [pope](#) takes a new name in imitation of [St. Peter's](#) change of name (see Knöpfler, "Die Namensänderung der Päpste" in "Compte rendu du congrés internat. cath. à Fribourg", 1897, sec. v, 158 sqq.). The doors have previously been opened by the secretary of the conclave; the masters of ceremonies are present, and formal cognizance is taken of the [pope's](#) answers. Immediately the masters of ceremonies lower the canopies of all the [cardinals'](#) chairs save that of the [pope-elect](#), and he is conducted to a neighbouring room where he is clothed in the [papal](#) garments (*immantatio*). The [cardinals](#) then advance and pay him the first "obedience", or homage (*adoratio*). The [pope](#) then either confirms or appoints the [cardinal camerlengo](#), who puts upon his finger the [Fisherman's Ring](#). Then follows the proclamation to the people made by the senior [cardinal-deacon](#), formerly from the central balcony of [St. Peter's](#) overlooking the great [Piazza](#), but since 1870 in [St. Peter's](#) itself. The conclave then usually terminates, the masons remove the temporary walls, and the [cardinals](#) retire to their various lodgings in the city, awaiting a reassembling for the second and third

adoratio and for the solemn **enthroning**. If the **pope** happens not to be a **bishop**, he must be **consecrated** at once and, according to immemorial tradition, by the **Cardinal-Bishop** of **Ostia**. If already a **bishop**, there takes place only the solemn *benedictio* or blessing. However, he enjoys full **jurisdiction** from the moment of his **election**. On the following Sunday or Holy Day takes place, at the hands of the senior **cardinal-deacon**, the **papal** "coronation" from which day the new **pope** dates the years of his pontificate. The last act is the formal taking possession (*possessio*) of the **Lateran Church**, omitted since 1870. For the so-called Veto, occasionally exercised in the past by the **Catholic Powers** (Spain, **Austria**, **France**), see **RIGHT OF EXCLUSION**.