



Why is the election of the pope so secretive and medieval?

Dear **Father Kerper**: I really like Pope Francis. He seems so joyful and down to earth. But as I followed the whole process of electing the Pope, a lot of disturbing questions popped into my mind. Here are the main ones: Why is everything so secretive and sort of medieval? No other organization acts this way. Can't we do it another way? And why do some people make such a fuss about the red shoes, cufflinks, and his vestments? I just don't understand. And, finally, why do popes change their names? This, too, seems outdated.

Let's start with the election process. You're absolutely right! No other major organization in the world picks its principal leader as the Catholic Church does. In most cases, groups use some form of democratic procedure to choose their leaders. Moreover, today people demand "transparency," which means open debate, the meticulous inspection of candidates, disclosure of vote tallies, financial data, and so forth.

Papal elections have none of these things. Why not? Because the pope is a spiritual leader, "the servant of the

servants of God." Whereas corporate and political leaders seek high office in order to advance their own ideas and, sad to say, even enrich themselves, the man chosen to be the pope must set aside his own interests.

The secrecy of the process, protected by sacred oaths and regulated by canon law, allows frank discussions among the cardinals about various candidates and urgent issues. If all this happened in the public forum, the process could become entirely politicized, being swayed by forces primarily interested in

advancing their own agendas rather than discerning God's will.

In the past, of course, secrecy did not always serve the spiritual interests of the Church; and one can read volumes about "bad popes" who aggressively sought the papacy for political purposes. However, at least since the mid-19th century the Church has had very good, even saintly, popes. In light of this long run of good choices, one can reasonably conclude that the current system, even though "medieval" in style, actually works. Consider the alternatives: Internet polls? Conventions? Campaigns?

You asked about the possibility of change. Yes! The manner of electing the pope is not revealed by God or dictated by Christ. Clearly, Jesus selected the Twelve Apostles unilaterally; and he chose Peter as their leader. Over the centuries, however, the Church has experimented with various ways of electing the Bishop of Rome, adapting the process to changing historical circumstances.

At the outset, bishops were often elected by the clergy and baptized faithful. As the Church grew, the "voter rolls" tended to shrink, including only the clergy, and even fewer and fewer of them. Bishops were chosen locally, frequently through the patronage of kings, princes, and other civil authorities. The same held true for the Bishop of Rome, whose influence was primarily local. In the 5th century, largely through the influence of Pope Saint Leo the Great, the "universal ministry" of the Bishop of Rome became much clearer and was widely accepted as authoritative.

For many centuries, the election of the pope remained almost exclusively "Roman business." However, as the Church rapidly expanded, the papacy became more international; and non-Romans became involved in the selection.

Beginning in 1179, the current practice of having the College of Cardinals elect the pope began. In 1271, the first "locked down" conclave was held. This rather uncomfortable arrangement was meant to force the cardinals to come to a speedy decision. It didn't. The conclave went on for nearly three years!

Other things have changed as well. In 1958, the conclave that elected Pope John XXIII had just 70 voters. This year 115 cardinals cast ballots. Also, in the past, all cardinals voted; now only

those under the age of 80 receive ballots.

As you can see from this very brief history, many things have changed over the centuries. Hence, the Church is not perpetually locked into the current system. One can imagine greater consultation in the future, perhaps even voters who are not cardinals. The Church, of course, changes very slowly; and the fact that the established system has produced a string of excellent and holy popes shows that the status quo, though perhaps “old-fashioned,” has a strong case for continuing.

Now, let's consider the red shoes, vestments, and so on. Here we have an opportunity to see the crucial difference between “traditions” and “Tradition.”

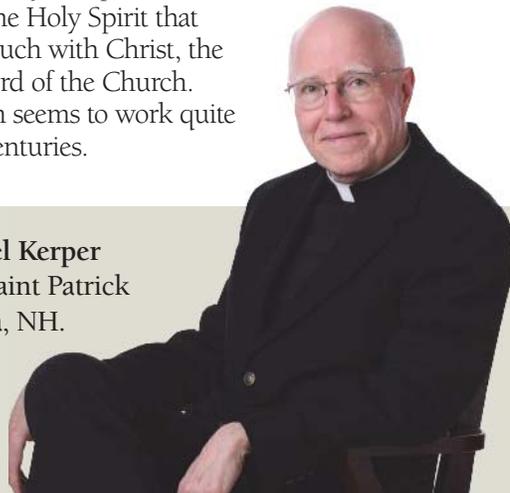
Whether a pope wears red shoes, black shoes, or no shoes at all is unimportant. While the red shoes had a symbolic purpose (red being a reminder of martyrdom) and established a link between one pope and the next, such things change. Consider the pope's white cassock. That custom began in 1566 when Michael Ghislieri, a Dominican friar, became Pope Pius V. Upon assuming the papacy, he kept wearing his religious habit, which was white. When he died in 1572, his successors continued the custom of wearing white cassocks. Is it required? Not really.

You asked about the pope changing his name. This, too, is merely a tradition that could quickly disappear. Until 555, all popes had retained their baptismal names. Then a man named Mercury — after the Greek deity — was chosen as Bishop of Rome. Mercury realized that some Christians would find it strange to have a bishop with a mythological name, so he changed it to John, the name of his immediate predecessor, who had been executed. The practice became customary, though as recently as 1555 Pope Marcellus II kept his baptismal name. Every pope since then has taken a new name.

Pope Francis, like other popes, chose his new name to signify the spiritual direction of his papacy: an emphasis on “newness” (no other pope has had that name), simplicity, and conformity to the Crucified and Risen Christ. Perhaps this custom seems outdated, but it's really quite contemporary: a form of branding, if you will.

The transition from Pope Benedict XVI to Pope Francis has helped us understand the difference between “traditions,” which human beings create, and “Tradition” — the vastly complicated process guided by the Holy Spirit that always keep us in touch with Christ, the founder and shepherd of the Church. Amazingly, Tradition seems to work quite well after all these centuries.

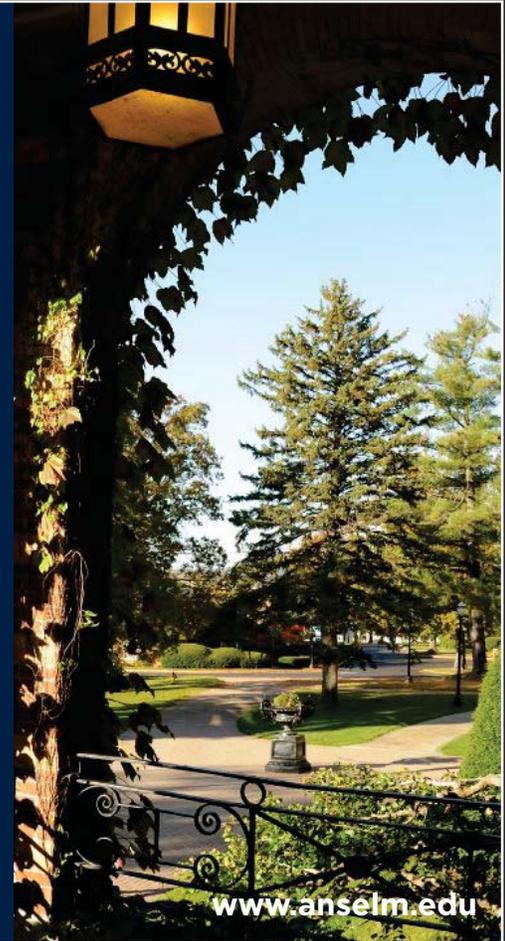
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