

Conclave to Elect Pope Expected to Start Early Next Week

Roman Catholic cardinals will decide later on Friday when to start their conclave to elect a successor to **Pope Benedict** and the secret gathering will most likely begin early next week, the Vatican said.

Benedict's surprise abdication last month has drawn most of the world's cardinals to Vatican City for discussions on the problems facing the 1.2 billion-member Church, and to decide on the profile of the man they want to take charge.

There is no clear favorite to take the helm of the Church, which faces an array of problems following Benedict's rocky, eight-year reign, ranging from **sexual abuse scandals** to internal strife at the heart of the Vatican administration.

Vatican spokesman Father Federico Lombardi said cardinals would vote later in the day on when to seclude themselves in the Sistine Chapel for the conclave balloting, with a decision expected soon after 7 p.m. local time (1 p.m. ET).

"I believe that it will start in the first few days of next week. They certainly won't decide to start tomorrow or on Sunday, but they could choose Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday," Lombardi told reporters at a daily news briefing.

A total of 115 elector-cardinals, all aged under 80, are expected to take part in the elaborate Sistine Chapel ritual, which will continue until one man receives at least a two-thirds majority, put at 77 votes.

Cardinal Jean-Baptiste Pham Minh Man was the last of the elector-cardinals to come to the Vatican, arriving on

Thursday. He joined about 150 cardinals of all ages who are discussing the state of the church before the conclave, in preliminary meetings known as general congregations.

Vatican officials have put pressure on those present not to divulge the content of those discussions, but leaks continue to appear in the Italian press, with La Stampa daily reporting that criticism of the Vatican bureaucracy continued to surface.

Lombardi said about 100 cardinals had taken the floor since the formal meetings started on Monday, adding that important informal conversations were also being held on the sidelines.

Quick Vote

The cardinals have made it clear they want a quick conclave to make sure that they can all return to their dioceses in time to lead Easter celebrations—the most important event in the Roman Catholic calendar.

Vatican insiders say the longer the general pre-discussions go on, the easier it should be to establish the best candidates to take the helm, possibly shortening the eventual vote.

Pope Benedict was elected in little over a day after just four rounds of voting, while his predecessor, Pope John Paul, was elected after eight ballots spaced out over three days.

Cardinals were traditionally locked into areas around the Sistine Chapel, famed for its Michelangelo frescoes, and not allowed out until they chose a new pontiff.

But the rules changed before the 2005 conclave and the red-capped prelates now get to reside in a comfortable Vatican hotel while they are not voting in the Sistine Chapel.

Father Lombardi said the cardinal electors would draw lots to see which rooms they would get to sleep in, with all external contact, including emails and telephone calls, forbidden.

Special jamming devices would also be set up in and around the Sistine Chapel and the residence to stop any outsiders from trying to eavesdrop and to prevent any mobile phone usage in the vicinity.

One senior prelate is believed to have let slip to friends in Germany that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had been elected pope in 2005 before the crowds waiting in the nearby St. Peter's Square had been informed.

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