Vatican

Vatican News



This file photo shows the Domus Sanctae Marthae at the Vatican Feb. 19, 2023. St. John Paul II built the residence, completed in 1996, to house cardinals sealed off from the rest of the world during a conclave to elect a new pope. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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St. John Paul II had the Domus Sanctae Marthae built primarily to house cardinals in simple comfort during a conclave.

Pope Francis, who stayed there during the conclave that elected him in 2013, decided to live there permanently rather than take up residence in the papal apartments of the Apostolic Palace.

That decision, as well as surpassing the limit of 120 cardinals under the age of 80, means the Vatican is back in a position of having to find places for cardinals to sleep during a conclave.

When they are not in the Sistine Chapel, seated under Michelangelo's frescoes to vote for the next pope, the cardinal-electors need a place to rest, converse and eat.

The cardinal electors are those under the age of 80, according to rules established by St. Paul VI, who also set the limit of having 120 cardinal electors at any one time. John Paul regularly exceeded that number but always specified that he was doing so temporarily and not changing the limit.

After consistories in 2001 and 2003, John Paul temporarily had 135 electors in the College of Cardinals. But after creating cardinals in December, Francis brought the tally up to 141. Between birthdays and deaths, the number of electors was down to 135 by April 21, when Francis died.

The Domus Sanctae Marthae is a five-story residence that was completed in 1996, specifically with a conclave in mind. Previously, the cardinals slept on cots in small, stuffy rooms next door to the Sistine Chapel.

Before Francis decided to live there, it housed a handful of fulltime residents as well as clerical and lay guests attending Vatican conferences and events.

As in the past, for a conclave most of its 131 rooms will be cleared out, and the cardinals will move in.

The exception is the block of rooms that were used by Francis and sealed off when he died. The papal portion of the building involves about half of what Europeans would describe as the second floor and what people in the U.S. would call the third floor. The sealed-off rooms include: two suites used by Francis; one each for his two secretaries; one for security staff; and one that had been used as the secretaries' office. In addition, there is a small chapel at the end of the corridor.

That leaves about 125 rooms for 133 people, since Matteo Bruni, director of the Vatican press office, said two of the 135 eligible cardinals are too ill to attend the conclave.

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An official of the College of Cardinals told Catholic News Service in January that the cardinals also would use vacant apartments in the building next door, the "vecchio" or "old" Santa Marta.

Even when there are enough rooms for everyone, the very formal rules for a conclave dictate that the cardinals draw lots for the rooms.

While the building offers relative comfort, it is not a luxury hotel. It has 105 two-room suites and 26 singles. Each bedroom has a bed, dresser, night table, clothes stand and a private bathroom with a shower. The suites also have a sitting room with a desk, three chairs, a cabinet and large closet.

The Domus, familiarly referred to simply as "Santa Marta," lies on the edge of Vatican City, just inside the Vatican walls, and its upper floors can be seen by Rome apartment buildings; for the 2005 conclave, the shutters on the windows were locked to ensure no one could see in. Of course, that also meant the cardinals could not see out.

Most of the cardinals will take short bus rides to the Sistine Chapel for their twice-daily voting sessions, although during the 2005 and 2013 conclaves, some cardinals insisted on walking — under the protective gaze of Vatican security — behind St. Peter's Basilica and into the chapel.

The building will be off-limits to "unauthorized persons" during the conclave, but staff will be needed to cook and clean. U.S. Cardinal Kevin Farrell, who serves as the

camerlengo or chamberlain, and three cardinal assistants are required to vet the personnel.

Those who passed the vetting — sacristans, priests who will be available to hear the cardinals' confessions, doctors, nurses, elevator operators, technical services staff, the colonel and major of the Pontifical Swiss Guard, as well as the director of security services for Vatican City State and some of his assistants — will take a formal oath of secrecy May 5. The penalty for divulging anything about the election is excommunication.

They also must "promise and swear to refrain from using any audio or video equipment capable of recording anything which takes place during the period of the election within Vatican City."

The rooms at Santa Marta all have telephones, but the cardinals are prohibited from using them to phone anyone outside the conclave. The internet connections and international satellite television system will be disconnected for the duration.

The building also has a large meeting room, a variety of small sitting rooms and a dining room. On the ground floor there is a main chapel, the triangle-shaped Chapel of the Holy Spirit, but there also are four private chapels, which are located at the end of hallways on the third and fifth floors of each of the building's two wings.

This story appears in the **Who will be the next pope?** feature series. View the full series.