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A giant screen shows Swiss Guards standing as the door of the Sistine Chapel is being closed, during the conclave to elect a new pope, at the Vatican May 7. Crowds gathered in St. Peter's Square as 133 cardinals eligible to vote entered the chapel. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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One hundred and thirty-three cardinals today (May 7) submit to the ancient practice of sequestering in the Sistine Chapel for a hidden ritual at the end of which the world will welcome a new pope. The stakes are high. The torrent of questions, speculation, breathless adulation of Pope Francis and breathtakingly nasty critiques unleashed even before the late pope was entombed at Santa Maria Maggiore point to a church and wider world on edge.

Shrunken in the digital age to communication in nanoseconds, the world has dissected and analyzed this most unpredictable conclave in unprecedented volume and in more ways than any before.

And now, after nearly two weeks of mourning and ritual, of dinners and coffees, private conversations and politicking, speeches and interviews, and pressure from all manner of interested parties on the outside, the room is to be sealed.

The princes of the church are left with themselves and the stark question of who among them is best fit to lead.

NCR's papal transition coverage

Since Pope Francis died April 21, the National Catholic Reporter staff has worked in Rome and the United States to cover the transition from Pope Francis' papacy to the election of a new pope. Read our work here:

- Who will be the next pope? Conclave 2025
- Papal front-runners: The men who could be pope
- The legacy of Pope Francis

To take the counsel of Francis one last time, perhaps our questions to this point have been "too small" or "partial questions." He gave that answer during a trip home from Africa in 2015, when a reporter asked if, given the severity of the AIDS crisis in Africa, the church should change its teaching on birth control, especially condoms.

"The morality of the church is found on this point, I think, in front of a perplexity," he said. "Fifth or Sixth commandment? Defend life, or that sexual relations be open to life? This is not the problem. The problem is bigger."

The papal insight is more profound in this moment than ever.

Problems and perplexities remain bigger. Bigger than the sum of the questions posed in the days since Francis died April 21 at age 88. Questions have hung over this conclave about issues including candidates' geographic origins, administrative experience, global familiarity, perceived place on the conservative-to-liberal spectrum and language proficiency. LGBTQ issues, the Latin Mass, the environment, synods, synodality, personality, charisma — all have been thrown into the calculus.

Read this next: How Pope Francis holds powerful sway over the 2025 conclave

It is consequential that the selection of the successor to St. Peter occurs against the backdrop of the ongoing clergy sexual abuse crisis, a stench emanating from hidden rot, and a rat's nest of financial scandal and shenanigans. These scandals will continue to contort the church in yet unknown ways and the next pope will have to be more prepared than any of his predecessors to confront it.

As became so dramatically evident during the 12-year Francis papacy, the person at the top can change not only the direction of the institution but how it is perceived throughout the world.

Francis changed the image of the church from a walled encampment where everyone's papers had to be in proper order to a community on the move and into the world, seeking to accompany "t*odos, todos, todos*" — everyone, especially those on the margins of society.

Woman prays in St. Peter's Square.

A woman prays as people gather in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican May 7, 2025, the first day of the conclave to elect a new pope. A total of 133 cardinal-electors entered the Sistine Chapel to begin voting. (OSV News/Reuters/Marko Djurica)

It was not as jarring a departure from the past as some misinformed observers would have us believe.

St. Pope John Paul II, for instance, was the first pontiff to visit a synagogue, the first to visit a mosque and the first to invite leaders of other faiths to join him in Assisi for an interreligious prayer service for peace.

Benedict XVI was legitimately labeled the "first green pope" for his theologically buttressed warnings about environmental destruction, the first pope to meet with sex abuse victims, the first to have a Twitter account and the first to resign, a step that dramatically humanized the papacy. His resignation in 2013 was an admission that even Peter's successors might have limited ability to handle certain circumstances. He further placed the office within the imaginative grasp of ordinary Catholics by describing it as a ministry.

Francis made his way to the papacy in 2013, it is now widely accepted, because of a bold speech describing a church that was ill, closed in on itself and, in a metaphorical sense, holding Jesus captive. He knew the corruption beneath the abuse and financial scandals that he would inherit. The church needed to change.

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In the hindsight of a dozen years, it seems obvious that Francis realized change meant more than administrative shuffling in the Roman Curia and new canon laws, essential as they might be.

The movement of the church since Vatican II, its greater openness to the world, to other religions, with popes showing up in religious circumstances that would have been unimaginable in earlier eras, giving credibility in prayer together to not only other denominations but other faiths, had consequences far beyond those discrete events. All of that was the result of the Spirit moving not only among the hierarchy and the ordained, but among the People of God as well.

Just as his predecessors sensed that the time was right for bold gestures, Francis sensed the time was right to emphasize the God of Mercy whose embrace goes well beyond denominational boundaries and whatever mechanisms we've devised to determine who is in and who is out.

He determined that the time was right to invoke synodality, an expansion of collegiality in the governance of the church. The time was right to include lay people, including women, in the synodal process. Just as the church can no longer retreat to its pre-*Nostra Aetate* views of other faiths, it can't retreat to the time when lay men and women were excluded from discussions of the church's activity in the wider world.

Hand on book

Cardinal Pietro Parolin places his hand on the Book of Gospels in the Sistine Chapel to make his oath of perpetual secrecy before the conclave to elect a new pope begins at the Vatican May 7, 2025. (CNS screengrab/Vatican Media)

Synodality is an important step if the church is not to become a "self-contained sect."

That same sense of movement or shift was behind the answer Francis gave on the plane trip home from Africa. "This question makes me think of what they asked Jesus one time: 'Tell me, master, is it licit to heal on the Sabbath?'

"Malnutrition, exploitation of persons, slave work, lack of drinking water," Francis said. "These are the problems."

The demands of the next pope are those that only an evolving, crisis-riven world of the 21st century could present. It will be a long journey through increasingly looming questions, in *urbi et orbi (to the city and the world)*, until injustice is conquered and all are healed.

The doors are sealed. The deliberations have begun. We pray that God is with them each step of the way and that their questions are as big and complex as a God of mercy and compassion might inspire.

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