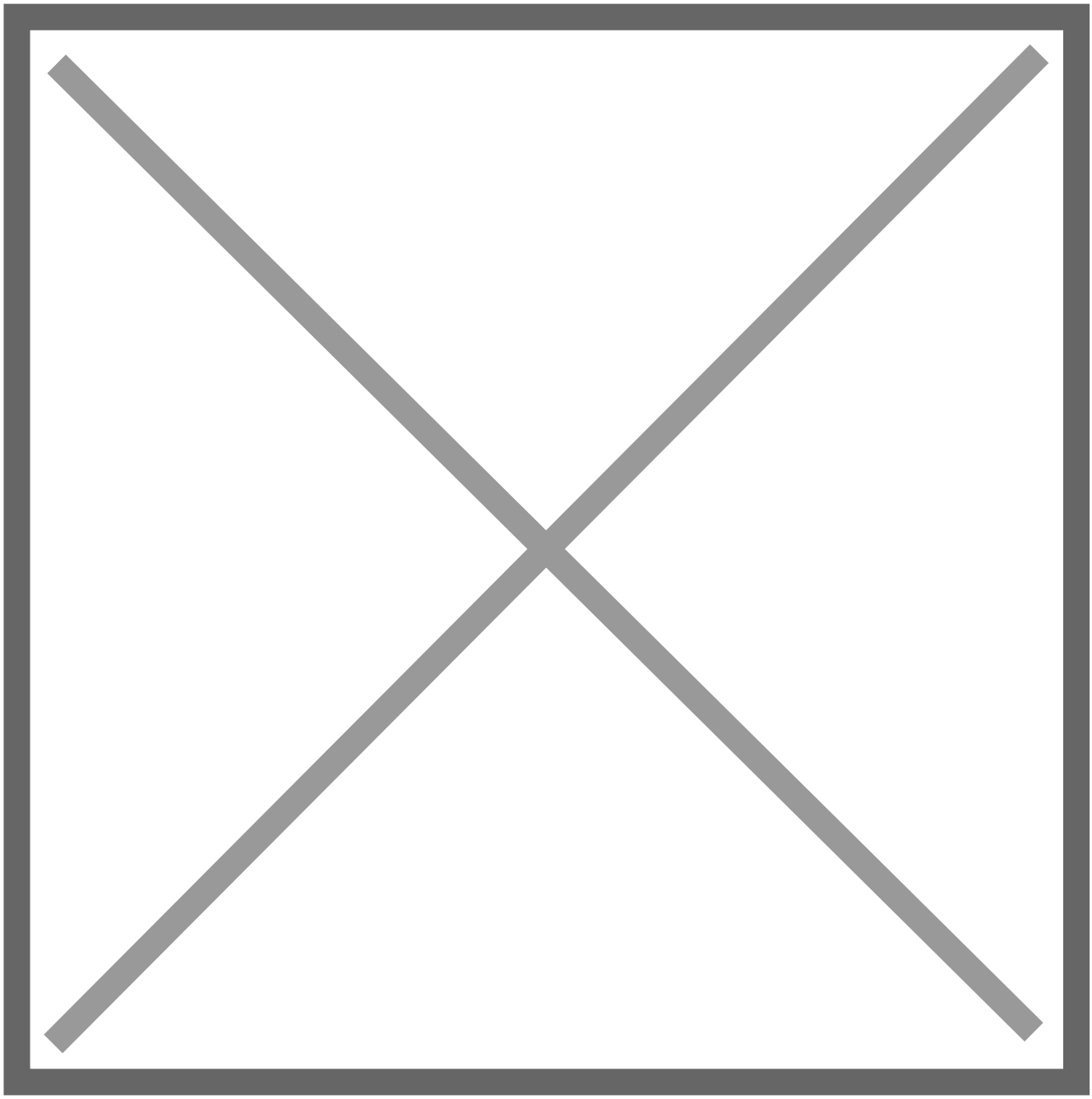
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Cardinals process into the Sistine Chapel before the conclave to elect a new pope begins at the Vatican May 7, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Cindy Wooden

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Invoking the help of the Holy Spirit and recognizing that millions of people all over the world were praying for them, 133 cardinals entered the Sistine Chapel with a singular goal: to elect "a worthy pastor" for the universal church.

Italian Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the top-ranking cardinal among the electors, led the cardinals in prayer at 4:30 p.m. May 7 in the Apostolic Palace's Pauline Chapel, just a short distance from the Sistine Chapel.

"The whole church, united with us in prayer, insistently invokes the grace of the Holy Spirit so that a worthy pastor for the whole flock of Christ would be elected by us," he told them.

"May the Lord direct our steps on the path of truth so that, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the holy apostles Peter and Paul and all the saints, we may always do what is pleasing to him," the cardinal prayed.



Msgr. Guido Marini, master of papal liturgical ceremonies, closes the doors to the Vatican's Sistine Chapel March 12, 2013, as cardinals from around the world begin the conclave to elect a successor to Pope Benedict XVI. The following day, on the fifth ballot, they elected Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, Argentina, who chose the name Francis. The cardinals will again gather May 7, 2025, to elect a a successor to Pope Francis, who died April 21. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

Behind altar servers carrying a cross and candles, priests assisting the cardinals processed toward the Sistine Chapel. The cardinals, walking two-by-two, followed in the reverse order of their rank within the College of Cardinals. Indian Cardinal George Koovakad and Italian Cardinal Fabio Baggio — cardinal deacons created by Pope Francis in December — were the first cardinals to cross the chapel's threshold.

Only cardinals under the age of 80 were eligible to enter the conclave, but it still was the largest group of cardinal electors ever assembled. In 1975, St. Paul VI set a limit of 120 cardinal electors and ruled that cardinals over the age of 80 could not enter a conclave. When he died in 1978, 111 cardinals elected Pope John Paul I; there also were 111 electors at the 1978 conclave that chose St. John Paul II. After he died in 2005, 115 electors chose Pope Benedict XVI and when he resigned in 2013, there also were 115 cardinals in the conclave that elected Pope Francis.

Entering the Sistine Chapel to elect Francis' successor, Koovakad and the other cardinals from the Eastern Catholic churches wore their traditions' "choral habit." The Latin-rite cardinals were dressed in red cassocks with a white rochet over top, a mozzetta (a short cape), their pectoral crosses, a zucchetto (skull cap) and a biretta, the three-cornered red hat they received when they were made cardinals.

The cardinal electors began their walk to the Sistine Chapel chanting the Litany of Saints, which started with prayers that God would have pity on them. They then invoked the saints, archangels and ancient biblical prophets to pray for them. They pleaded for the aid of Christ, asking for his mercy and protection. They also prayed for those who have died and those threatened by hunger and war.

The cardinals asked God to give the world peace, to "comfort and enlighten" the church, help Christians reconcile with each other and to lead all people to the truth of the Gospel.

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Once in the chapel, they called on the help of the Holy Spirit by singing the ancient hymn, "Veni Creator Spiritus" ("Come, Creator Spirit").

Then the cardinals from more than 70 countries vowed that, if elected pope, they would faithfully fulfill the ministry of universal pastor of the church and would defend

the rights and freedom of the Holy See.

They also solemnly swore to scrupulously follow the rules for the election of a pope and keep secret the results of the votes, unless they have express permission from the new pope to reveal details.

After reciting the oath together, each cardinal walked up to the Book of the Gospels, put his right hand on it, said his name and sealed his oath, "So help me God and these holy Gospels that I touch with my hand."

The Book of the Gospels was open to the page with Matthew 4:12-23, which recounts Jesus calling his first disciples.

Parolin took the oath first, followed by the cardinals in order of rank, ending with Koovakad.

The portion broadcast by Vatican Media ended with Archbishop Diego Ravelli, master of papal liturgical ceremonies, saying, "Extra omnes," ordering out everyone not authorized to remain. The ceremony lasted about 75 minutes.

However, 90-year-old Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa, the retired preacher of the papal household, stayed behind. Before the conclave, the cardinals had chosen him to give a meditation "on the problems facing the church" and "on the need for careful discernment in choosing the new pope."

The average age of the 133 cardinals was just over 70, slightly younger than the average age of electors who participated in the last conclave, in 2013, when the average age was close to 72.

Ten U.S. cardinals were among those filing into the Sistine Chapel: Cardinals Raymond Burke, retired prefect of the Apostolic Signature; Blase Cupich of Chicago; Daniel DiNardo, retired archbishop of Galveston-Houston; Timothy Dolan of New York; Kevin Farrell, prefect of the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life under Francis; Wilton Gregory, retired archbishop of Washington; James Harvey, archpriest of Rome's Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls; Robert McElroy of Washington; Robert Prevost, prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops under Francis; and Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey.

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