Opinion
NCR Voices



People wait for the smoke to rise from the chimney in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on the evening of May 7, 2025, as cardinals gather in the Sistine Chapel on the first day of the conclave to elect a new pope. (OSV News/Reuters/Yara Nardi)



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Rome — May 7, 2025
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Now, we wait.

The cardinal-electors have been sequestered. They had to surrender their cellphones this morning as they entered the Casa Santa Marta. This should expedite the proceedings, as most cardinals, like the rest of us, rely on our cellphones for virtually everything: calling a cab, making a restaurant reservation, keeping our schedule and, of course, calling colleagues and friends.

In the 13th century, as the longest conclave in history — three years! — dragged on, the citizenry of Viterbo removed the roof off the palace where the cardinals were meeting, exposing them to the elements, in order to expedite the proceedings. Taking away cellphones might have the same expediting effect. Being offline in the 21st century is the equivalent of being without a roof in the 13th.

We Americans are especially terrible with expectancy. During Advent, I sometimes have called attention to our inability to cultivate a sense of expectancy: In our consumer culture, we want it now, whatever "it" is.

At 9 p.m. in Rome, black smoke emerged from the chimney above the Sistine chapel. Tomorrow, probably around noon Rome time, there will be more black smoke. The only conclave to elect a pope on the third ballot in modern times was in 1939, when the gathering storm of war led the cardinals to turn quickly to the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, who also benefited from the fact he seemed to come from central casting for the role of pope during the years between Vatican I and Vatican II: authoritative, elevated, regal.

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The 2025 conclave began with the singing of the Litany of the Saints, invoking the "Church Triumphant," the saints in heaven, to come to the aid of the "Church

Militant," believers here on earth. Then the Sistine Chapel choir sang the hymn "Veni, Creator Spiritus," invoking the Holy Spirit's aid and guidance. One cardinal who participated in a previous synod once told me that he was acutely aware that the entire Catholic world was praying for the cardinals as they began their deliberations.

A conclave is not merely a spiritual event, but a religious one. As David Brooks wrote in a column last December:

> Just as being religious without being spiritual felt empty, being spiritual without religion doesn't work for me. Vague spirituality seduces me to worship a state of my own mind, rather than the source of love itself. It lures me to a place outside history, with no overarching direction. Mere spirituality invariably teaches me the easy lessons that I already wanted to learn.

There are no easy lessons, or easy choices, for the cardinals in conclave. Standing before Michelangelo's mural "The Last Judgment" as they cast their ballots is a stark reminder that there is nothing vaguely spiritual about the decision they are called to make.

The cardinals are men who know their own limits, and the limits of each other. They are entrusting the church to God, not just to the one they elect. They are binding themselves to Christ's church by vowing obedience to the successor of Peter.

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For the Catholic, the only means of liberation comes through communion. The pope is the guarantor of that communion, a communion that stretches across all national boundaries and across the centuries, too.

Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, dean of the College of Cardinals, spoke to the pope's role in fostering communion in his homily at the Mass for the Election of the Roman

Pontiff:

> Among the tasks of every successor of Peter is that of fostering communion: communion of all Christians with Christ; communion of the bishops with the pope; communion of the bishops among themselves. This is not a self-referential communion, but one that is entirely directed towards communion among persons, peoples and cultures, with a concern that the church should always be a "home and school of communion."

The *sede vacante* period is strange. At Mass, we pray for the pope in the Eucharistic prayer, but not now. The prayer sounds odd, like something is missing, because something is missing. The papacy is the guarantor of the church's catholicity, the point of unity for an increasingly diverse flock. Catholicism makes no sense without a pope.

We wait. Whatever discussions happen inside the walls of the conclave, we can only pray that the Holy Spirit guides the cardinals' choice. We are asking the divine to enter history in this moment and in this place. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger famously put the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in context, noting that there were too many instances of disastrous papacies to think the Holy Spirit's inspiration guarantees success. The presence of the Holy Spirit only guarantees that "we can't entirely wreck the thing."

So, we can confidently hope that the new pope does not entirely wreck the thing! And that the cardinal electors will soon get their cellphones back.

*The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.*

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