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Isabel Segovia Severin traveled from Viña Del Mar, Chile, in hopes of seeing white smoke and the new pope. "We leave tomorrow so we hope that today is the day," she said on May 8, the second day of the conclave. (NCR photo/Olivia Bardo)



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On Wednesday, the black smoke was late. On Thursday, the black smoke was early.

Many pilgrims gasped May 8 and ran to large display screens set up in the plaza of St. Peter’s Square. They showed smoke billowing from the narrow stovepipe. Others who only heard the gasps wondered if the smoke was white.

"You have to trust the process … you don't want them to rush it," said Elizabeth Whelan of Newfoundland, Canada. "You just want them to make the right decision."

The smoke at 11:51 a.m. Rome time signaled three rounds of voting had failed to achieve the two-thirds majority necessary to elect a new pope to succeed Pope Francis, who died April 21.

Like many Catholics gathered in St. Peter's Square on the first night of the conclave, Whelan found herself wondering what was taking so long.

Smoke that had been expected at 7 p.m. in Rome didn't materialize until 9 p.m. But she returned to the square in the morning May 8 thinking that whatever caused the delay didn't matter when it comes to picking a pope.



A young woman who stood alone among scattered crowds at St. Peter’s Square sketched St. Peter's Basilica 10 minutes before black smoke poured out of the chimney May 8. (NCR photo/Olivia Bardo)

Read this next: Black smoke again on morning of conclave's 2nd day signals no pope elected yet

Whelan watched, along with thousands of others in the plaza, as black smoke once again flowed out of the chimney, this time earlier than expected, about 10 minutes before noon in Rome.

But she hopes the 133 cardinal electors make their decision by the time her plane leaves Monday.

She has no favorites, she said, "just somebody who follows what Francis was doing, care for the world, care for humanity, things like that."

And she took time off of work with a friend from church to see who that will be.



Colter Sikora of Madison, Wisconsin, said that all popes have had good aspects, as he waited May 8. "But God's got to take care of it. It's his job." (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Nearby, Colter Sikora of the United States also watched.

Sikora, of Madison, Wisconsin, described himself as a Catholic from the John Paul II generation.

"I'm not particularly attached to having a specific model of a pope, and I don't even think it's right to talk that way with whoever comes next," he said. "I just want a good one."

All popes have had good aspects, he said as he waited.

"But God's got to take care of it. It's his job."



A group of Italian teens leaned against each other and napped while awaiting smoke from the Sistine Chapel May 8 until a man nearby offered to teach them a card game. Black smoke, indicating the cardinals had not yet chosen a new pope, flowed from the chimney on the Sistine Chapel at 11:51 a.m. Rome time. (NCR photo/Olivia Bardo)

Lucia Pérez of Argentina carefully set up her country's flag facing the façade of St. Peter's Basilica. The first day of the conclave had been long, she said, but she still wanted to be part of it, so she returned to the square.

She said she trusted that the Holy Spirit was at work among the cardinals as the people of God waited outside and around the world for a decision.

Pérez said she hoped for a pope that will follow in the steps of Pope Francis when it comes to being open to outsiders, the downtrodden, those who feel left out. The church changed under Francis, she said, and she hopes those making the decision

will realize that.

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Perez is especially concerned about what the decision will mean for youth. Francis offered them a vision of a church that wasn't just a structure, not judgmental, as many had experienced or believed.

"He showed us a church that wasn't like the one before," she said "He showed a church that doesn't judge you but one that embraces you."



People watch as black smoke billows from the chimney on the Sistine Chapel May 8, 2025, on the second day of the conclave at the Vatican. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

Fr. Federico Pelicon, an Italian priest serving in the Diocese of Chur, Switzerland, who happened to be in Rome for personal reasons, said he was not concerned there

was no election yet. "I am very happy because it means that there is no rash election," Pelicon said.

"My dreams and expectations are for a papacy in full continuity with that of Francis," Pelicon said. "I think the pastorality, the vivacity, the creativity, the genius of a pope is very important in sensing and picking up in the changes — that seed that has to grow, bear fruit and be as a pruned tree. I think a pope has to give this orientation."



Elizabeth Whelan of Newfoundland, on right, holds a Canadian flag May 8 in St. Peter's Square. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Two friends from Miami, Andres Novoa and Hector Lance, stood alongside Denise Washington, a New Yorker who lives in Umbria and London. The trio had just met in Rome.

"I’m very hopeful that, you know, we got black smoke two in a row," said Andres Novoa, a member of the Archdiocese of Miami. "I'm hopeful that it wasn't a quick vote because, you know, there are a lot of things that we're dealing with in the church right now."

"I'm glad that they're spending time to get to know each other," he said.

Hector Lance, also from Miami, said he admired the traditionalist Cardinal Robert Sarah of Guinea. "There's a lot of lack of clarity in today's world, and we need someone that knows how to explain difficult concepts clearly," Lance said.

Lance said he also likes Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, whose understanding of the Middle East could bridge spiritual and political divides as Pope John Paul II had done.

Standing with them was Denise Washington. While not Catholic, Washington said she felt deeply moved by Pope Francis's focus on the marginalized. "I just felt that Francis was a type of individual who was trying to move the Church forward," Washington said.

Living between London and Umbria, she came to Rome to witness this moment of transformation. "I think there are a number of people, particularly young people, who are actually looking to see someone who may be similar," Washington said.



A religious sister waits in St. Peter's Square May 8, 2025, on the second day of the conclave at the Vatican. (CNS photo/Pablo Esparza)

At the front of St. Peter's Square, 25-year-old Trent Brown proudly waved a giant Canadian flag waved. Brown of Stonewall, Canada said, "I've always really wanted to see a conclave, and I told myself that I would go when the Holy Father passed."

Brown flew across the Atlantic to stand among thousands in prayer and hope. "I took a bet that it wouldn't go longer than a week," he laughed. He backs Pizzaballa because he could bring a combination of Benedict XVI and Francis -- “a balance and unity to the Church, to speak to the pastoral while also helping to speak to those who are attracted to the traditional.”

Isabel Segovia Severin, from Viña Del Mar, Chile, flew into Rome on May 5, to St. Peter’s Square and hopes to see the new pope before she returns home. "I think the Papa Francesco was a very good papa. He was trying to gather people to the church."

It's not easy to brave the blazing Roman sun for hours while waiting for a few minutes of smoke.

But Brennan Hewitt and mom Kathy Hewitt said it's worth the price of being part of the history of their faith.

At the plaza facing St. Peter's Basilica they waved two small U.S. flags as they waited for a signal of the new pope to come.

"It's a major difference from watching it at home on a TV than being here, because we're the first ones to find out, watching the chimney," said Brennan.

"It's powerful, amazing, breathtaking," added Kathy.

Brennan was studying abroad when Pope Francis died and she had made plans to travel with her son when the days of the conclave were announced. She added a few more days to the vacation, hoping to take part in the public aspect, which involves a lot of sitting and waiting for a little chimney to deliver the news of a new pope.

"That's small," said Arizona's Phyllis Cornell when she saw it May 7. "I can't believe it's that little pipe."

"It looks bigger on TV," added her friend Candess Hunter.

Neither is Catholic, but they decided to visit the Vatican this week.

"It's exciting and all of the energy in the square," said Cornell. "I think it's history."

El Salvador Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chavez faced the balcony saying, "Viva el Nuevo papa," cheering for the new pope, hoping the new one will be like Francis.

Olivia Bardo contributed to this report.

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