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Vatican pins down schedule, details as conclave nears

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NCR Today

Conclave 2013

Talk of smoke -- white and black and when to look for it -- dominated the Vatican press briefing Saturday following the second-to-last formal meeting Catholic cardinals will have before they begin the process of electing a new pope.

The cardinals had voted Friday evening to open the conclave, during which voting for the pope takes place, on Tuesday.

On Friday morning, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Dean of the College of Cardinals, was not sure the cardinals would be ready to vote on a date Friday evening, said Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, at Saturday morning's press conference. But the overwhelming feeling going into the evening congregation was that they should vote and they did, Lombardi said.

The vote was the first thing on the agenda, and the March 12 date passed overwhelmingly, by a margin of 10 to 1, Lombardi said.

Seventeen cardinals spoke in Saturday's general congregation, the ninth congregation since the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI on Feb. 28. The general themes discussed were expectations of the new pope, activity of the Holy See, improving the work of the Curia, and the church in the world, according to the Vatican spokesman.

The reminder of the press briefing was about the schedule for the next few days until the 115 cardinal electors begin their secret deliberations in the Sistine Chapel.

Sunday, the cardinals are to visit and celebrate Mass at their titular churches in Rome. Monday they meet

for their final general congregation before the conclave.

Monday evening, the auxiliary personnel who will assist the cardinals inside the conclave will take their oaths of secrecy.

Tuesday morning at 7:30 a.m. Rome time (2:30 a.m. EST), the cardinals will begin moving into Casa Santa Marta, the Vatican hotel that will serve as their temporary home for the duration of the conclave.

At 10 a.m. they will concelebrate a Mass for the election of a new pope and then gather in the Pauline Chapel to begin their procession into the Sistine Chapel beginning at about 4:30 p.m. the process will take about an hour.

Extra omnes (Everybody out) is decreed, the cardinals are left along in the Sistine Chapels and the doors are closed. They will pray and listen to a meditation preached by Maltese Cardinal Prospero Grech, an 87-year-old Augustinian friar and Scripture scholar.

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There is expected to be one vote taken Tuesday evening. After that, four votes will be taken per day: two in the morning and two in the afternoon.

The Vatican spokesman said journalists should be prepared to watch for smoke each day around noon, when ballots from both morning votes are burned, and around 7 p.m. when the afternoon ballots are burned. If a pope is elected in the first round of voting in the morning or the afternoon, Lombardi said, smoke would appear at about 10:30 a.m. or 5:30 p.m. Bells will also be rung to announce the election of a new pope. About 45 minutes after the smoke and bells, the new pope would appear at the window of the papal apartment, he said.

While acknowledging that in the past conclaves it has been hard to distinguish the color of the smoke, Lombardi said the Vatican would stay with the traditional methods of announcing a new pope.

He encouraged the journalists at the press briefing to prepare themselves psychologically for the uncertainty.

"A little suspense is good for all of us," said Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, who is providing English translation during the briefings. "This is not a Swiss watch. ... We are not sending out any SMS or text messages, you have to come and see for yourself."

Press tours to view the remodeled Sistine Chapel began Saturday at about 11 a.m. Rome time. In the first two hours, about 400 media personnel had been escorted through the chapel and the tours would continue until 5 p.m.

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