

Speaking of the papal election

by Sabine Eiche

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Over the next few weeks, the resignation of Pope Benedict and the election of his successor will be a recurrent topic in the news worldwide. The ritual about to be carried out doesn't happen as frequently as, say, a presidential election. For this and other reasons, the terminology used in reporting on the event is sometimes far from obvious.

Even the history of the places involved isn't always common knowledge. The Vatican, for instance, derives its name from the Latin "Vaticanus," the ancient Roman name of the hill on which it sits. In the 4th century, the first church of St. Peter's was built over what is believed to have been the tomb of Saint Peter. The present church, on the same site, dates from the 16th-17th centuries.

In 1929, by the terms of the Lateran Treaty, the Vatican was established as an independent city-state, ruled by the Bishop of Rome, who is the Pope. St. Peter's is one of the four major papal basilicas in Rome, but not the Cathedral, which is St. John Lateran. From the 4th until the early 15th century, the palace attached to St. John Lateran was the pope's official Roman residence. In 1447 construction began of a new papal palace inside the Vatican.

The Vatican Palace was continually renovated, rebuilt and expanded. In 1473 Pope Sixtus IV replaced the ruinous medieval "Cappella Maggiore" with the Sistine Chapel. Decorated by Michelangelo in the 16th century, it is where voting takes place during papal conclaves.

The term conclave, the meeting of the College of Cardinals to elect a pope, derives from the Latin "cum clavis," meaning with key – in earlier centuries

cardinals were locked into small cells in the Vatican Palace to prevent the Holy Roman Emperor, or the French or Spanish king, from interfering in the election process.

The College of Cardinals is formed of the three cardinalitial orders – the cardinal bishops, cardinal priests and cardinal deacons. “Cardo,” the Latin for hinge, principal, is the root of the word referring to the dignity of cardinal. Bishop derives ultimately from the Greek for overseer, by way of the Latin “biscopus” and “episcopus.” Priest, from the Latin “presbyter,” defines the clergyman in the second of the holy orders, below the bishop but above the deacon. The Greek word for servant, messenger, “diaconus” in Latin, is the source for the English word deacon.

Although the College of Cardinals comprises all the cardinals in the Catholic Church, only those under the age of 80 may vote. After Mass on the first day of voting, the cardinals gather in the Sistine Chapel to cast their secret ballots. The successful candidate must receive a two-thirds majority. Voting continues twice a day until the required majority is reached. After each failed vote the ballots are mixed with straw and burned in a stove, producing a dark smoke, clearly visible above the Sistine Chapel. When the cardinals finally elect a pope, the smoke is white. If the victor is, by chance, not a bishop, he is quickly consecrated. The issue of the vote is announced to the world when a cardinal steps onto the loggia of the Vatican Palace, overlooking St. Peter’s Square, and proclaims, “Habemus Papam.”