

A fast conclave or an impatient world?

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Camilla Tenaglia reflects on the conclave and the times of the Church—caught between media demands, historical memory, and the urgency of the present.

Over the past two days, I've heard much talk of silence and waiting, of a time somehow outside of time. Many say the conclave teaches us patience. I disagree. Yes, we waited 16 days for the conclave to begin—a delay rooted in a rule established by Pius XI to allow cardinals enough time to reach Rome. That rule dates back to 1922, when an Atlantic crossing took considerably longer than today. As a matter of fact, some cardinals still arrived late back then and missed their opportunity to vote. Yet this time, the conclave itself was swift: just four ballots across two days, in keeping with every 21st-century conclave. I don't think it's a coincidence.

Events surrounding a papal death and succession have long been shaped as media events. They are planned and managed with the global audience in mind. This is evident in the symbolic image circulated by Vatican media, showing Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky in St. Peter's Basilica ————— —an image not captured by chance but carefully composed and distributed. It signals a potential agreement on Ukraine, while also highlighting the central role of Rome, which in 2025 continues to assert its position as a mediator in the international system. St. Peter's Basilica is portrayed as the site where international agreements are forged and the Church remains visibly present—not merely due to the known presence of Francis' body, but also because, in the Vatican News photograph, a priest can be seen in the background moving chairs. The church is everyone's home, even the powerful can find a safe place.

The influence of media on conclaves is hardly new. The election of Pius XII in 1939 was the first papal conclave to be broadcast live. Eugenio Pacelli, then Cardinal Secretary of State and camerlengo after the death of Pius XI, understood the significance of media. He established the Vatican Press Office on February 20, just before the conclave began, to provide journalists with accurate information. To ensure all necessary radio links for the multilingual live broadcasts, a Vatican Radio technician was included among the laypeople confined with the conclave—alongside a bricklayer, a carpenter, two barbers, two doctors, and two pharmacists—to set up the microphone for the *Habemus Papam* announcement and the communication line to the radio station. The coronation of Pius XII on March 12 was organized with special attention to the visual aspects of the ceremony, to ensure that the photographs would be of the highest quality.

Cardinal Francesco Marchetti Selvaggiani remarked, "If the angels had voted, they would have chosen Elia Dalla Costa. If the demons had voted, they would have chosen me. But men voted." It

was March 2, just before Hitler invaded the Sudetenland. A second world war loomed, and within the walls of the Vatican, they chose to place all their hopes in a diplomat who, incidentally, had extensive dealings with Germany. Eugenio Pacelli had been nuncio in Munich and Berlin and had managed the concordat as a State Cardinal. It had only come to the third ballot. At the conclave men voted, for human, political, economic, geopolitical reasons and those men knew that the answer was needed immediately.

The cardinals reached a consensus on the fourth ballot. Perhaps contemporary society no longer has a great capacity for attention and is not ready to wait days to have a Pope. Perhaps today's world, torn apart by wars that continue to multiply, needed a quick answer. The Catholic Church, which in recent years seemed very split within itself, quickly chose. We hope it is not only a sign of the present time and media needs, but also of that unity that the new Pope already hoped for in his first speech.

The College of Cardinals elected Robert Francis Prevost, born in Chicago but with a career as a missionary and bishop in Peru. He spoke in Italian and spoke in Spanish. It looks like an arm stretched out to the other side of the Atlantic, but without forgetting the south of the world so dear to Francis, who had appointed him head of the dicastery for bishops. Prevost gave himself the name of Leo XIV. The reference seems to be to Leo XIII, Gioacchino Pecci, pontiff from 1878 to 1903. The first Pope to appear on video, especially the Pope of the social doctrine of the Church. With his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 1891 he had put the social question at the center of ecclesiastical action, making Catholic association activity flourish. Surely in 2025 there are many *rerum novarum*, we will see how the new Leo will want to deal with them.

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