Talking to kids about conclave by Colleen Pressprich



White smoke billows from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel March 13 at the Vatican. Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected the 266th Roman Catholic pontiff. (CNS photo/Paul Haring) (March 13, 2013)

As a member of the JPII generation, I didn't experience a Church conclave until I was a college student. Even then, it was difficult to understand the ins and outs of what was happening in the Church.

This is my first time experiencing a conclave with my children, and I am so excited. The whole world is watching the Church right now. The richness and fullness of our Catholic faith are on display. Each step of this process is steeped in

meaning and tradition, which is wonderful, but can sometimes feel overwhelming, especially when you're trying to explain to kids.

I can help. I spent much of the last two years researching all things papacy-related for an upcoming book for OSV Kids on the topic. Here's everything you need to know to be able to explain to your kids what's happening in our Church today.

Some tips to get you started

1. Teaching our kids about faith doesn't have to feel like school, so as we approach the conclave, remember, you don't need to be teaching formal lessons about the process. Simply be excited and offer them the chance to share that excitement with you. Talk about something you loved about Pope Francis, any memories of the last conclave, or what you're most curious about.

2. Remember, it's okay not to know all of the answers about conclave traditions and procedures- most of us have only lived through a couple of these. I love it when my kids ask something I don't know because it allows me to model being curious, how to look up answers, and shows them that learning, especially about our Faith, is a lifelong process.

3. When you're discussing the conclave or the papacy, make sure to keep the answers at their level. Watering down information too much or overly complicating it equally risk your kids not getting the answer they're looking for. Listen to their responses and ask questions about what they're noticing and wondering. Let them guide your conversation.

4. We live in an incredible time. The information of the world is at our fingertips, quite literally with the click of a mouse or a tap on a screen. Use that to your advantage. Videos and photos will help make the conclave real and tangible. Children are concrete by nature; they internalize best what they can see and hear. You can look at the Sistine Chapel, so they have a picture in their head of where the cardinals will be sitting; watch videos of popes making their entrance for the first time onto the balcony at St. Peter's; let them see what the ballots look like; pull up the live feed of the chimney and let them watch and wait with the rest of the world for white smoke.

5. Finally, help your children to feel connected to the Universal Church during this period by encouraging them to pray for the Cardinals as they meet and for our future Pope. Consider adding prayer to your family's schedule or making this the intention for the prayer time you already have.

Conclave FAQs

To make your job of explaining this exciting time to your kids easier, here are a few of the most commonly asked questions about the process. Though these are written for you as a parent, I've kept the phrasing and information simple enough to read to your kids if you choose.

What do Interregnum and Sede Vacante mean?

Currently we are in the midst of a period known as the

Interregnum or the *Sede Vacante*. Both are Latin words used to identify the period between the death of one pope and the election of another. *Interregnum* means “between the reign” and *Sede Vacante*, “the seat is vacant.”

During the *Interregnum*, the pope is mourned and buried, and preparations are made for the upcoming conclave. The final phase of the *Interregnum* is the conclave itself.

What’s a conclave?

A conclave is quite simply the meeting of cardinals during which the new pope is elected. The name comes from a Latin term for “locked room,” since the Cardinals are isolated during this process.

Who’s in charge?

After the death of the Pope, the College of Cardinals is in charge of keeping the ordinary activities of the Church going until a new Pope is elected.

Who are the Cardinals?

The term “Cardinal” is a title of honor within the Catholic Church. Cardinals are above bishops in the hierarchy and are the pope’s closest advisors. Like the bird that shares their name, Cardinals can be recognized by their red clothes, which symbolize their readiness to shed their blood for the Church.

There are 252 cardinals, but only 135 are eligible to vote in the conclave. This is because the others are over the age of 80 and are thus disqualified.

How is a Pope Chosen?

The rules and procedures that govern the election of a pope date back centuries.

The Cardinals gather in the Sistine Chapel, where they are sealed off from the rest of the world. Cardinals are not allowed to leave except to go to the bathroom or if they become sick. There are even strict rules about who is allowed in. Everyone is sworn to secrecy.

Who can become the pope?

Technically, any baptized male in the Catholic Church could be elected to the papacy. But in practice, the Cardinals usually elect a fellow Cardinal.

How does voting happen?

Papal elections are held by secret ballot. It takes a ⅔ majority of votes to elect a new pope – in this conclave, that means 90 votes. There are two votes each morning and two each afternoon until a new pope is elected.

After each vote, the ballots are burned. The only news that the world outside receives about what's happening inside the conclave is through smoke issuing from the chimney. Black smoke indicates that a vote was not successful. White smoke tells everyone that the pope has been chosen. The colors are the result of chemicals added to the ballots as they are burned.

What happens when a pope is elected?

After being elected, the new Pope announces his papal name to the Cardinals, who greet him and offer their allegiance.

He then goes to a small room off to the side of the Sistine Chapel called the Room of Tears. The name comes from the many tears newly elected popes have shed in it as they spend a few minutes getting used to their new role.

At the beginning of the conclave, three sets of white papal

robes (small, medium, and large) are laid out in the Room of Tears, ready for whoever is elected. The new Pope will need to change into white instead of the red he was wearing just a few minutes before.

What does “Habemus Papam” mean?

Once the white smoke has appeared from the Sistine Chapel chimney, it’s only a matter of time before the announcement is made. The words *habemus papam* (we have a pope) are announced from the balcony at St. Peter’s Basilica. The Pope is identified first by his former name, and then by the new name he has chosen.

After he is announced, the new pope greets the people in St. Peter’s Square and offers his first papal blessing.

I hope that this unique time within the Church is rich in meaning for your family and that it is an opportunity to spark engagement and interest in your kids!