

The Breeze of the Holy Spirit through the History of the Catholic church.

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The Church has never been abandoned or left alone in history. In every era of trouble, persecution, and doctrinal crisis including the challenges faced during the Great Schism¹, the impact of the protestant Reformation, at the time of leadership crisis, such as periods of papal vacancy or the confusion of multiple claimants to the papacy the dark period of the presence of three popes at once, and the years spent waiting for the election of new pope that church had always been supported and protected by the Holy Spirit. From the earliest days, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit directed the apostles in their mission, empowered them to preach, confirmed their message through miracles, and provided comfort and unity to the fledgling Church² (Acts 2:42-47, Acts 9:31). Even in more recent times, such as during the persecutions of the 20th century³ or the challenges that faced after the convocation and the practicing of the decision of Vatican II later become the face of the church, Holy Spirit have continued to bear witness to the unfailing guidance. In all these difficulties, the Church's perseverance is evident, testifying to the Spirit's constant presence as guide and protector throughout history. Thus, the history of Christianity is a testament to the unfailing guidance of the Holy Spirit, whose presence has continually led, protected, and renewed the Church in every generation⁴. This enduring perseverance and unity, visible in every age of the Church, prepare us to reflect on how the Holy Spirit's guidance has been particularly manifest in the selection of the Church's leaders throughout history.

The history of papal elections from Pope John Paul I through to Pope Leo XIV reveals a process deeply rooted in prayerful discernment and trust in divine guidance. While the cardinals gather to elect a new pope, invoking the Holy Spirit's assistance through prayers such as *Veni Creator Spiritus*, the process is not one of direct divine dictation, but instead of the Spirit enlightening and inspiring the electors as they use their reason and judgement to discern the needs of the Church at

¹ Cf. D.D. EMMONS, «Understanding the Great East-West Schism».

² Cf. «The Holy See - Vatican web site».

³ Cf. O. AMAECHINA – O. CONTRIBUTOR, «The Holy Spirit can help the Church in time of persecution».

⁴ Cf. «The Holy See - Vatican web site».

each moment⁵. I still remember the documentary about Pope Francis that appeared on Netflix. The cardinal shared the experience, explaining how the cardinals were able to feel the real presence of the Holy Spirit in the Sistine Chapel. At the same time, we can see that in the history shows, the Holy Spirit does not override human freedom but works through it, ensuring that, even amid human limitations, the Church is never left unguided or abandoned. In each papal selection, it becomes clear that it is ultimately not human ambition or worldly calculation that prevails, but the gentle, persistent guidance of the Holy Spirit leading the Church forward⁶.

After the sudden death of Pope John Paul I, the church faced a moment of uncertainty. In the conclave that followed, cardinals from around the world gathered in prayer, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit as they discerned the church's next Pope. The process was marked not by political maneuvering alone, but by deep spiritual reflection, with the cardinals invoking the Holy Spirit to enlighten their minds and hearts. Although initial votes focused on prominent Italian candidates, neither could secure the necessary consensus, leading the electors to look beyond traditional expectations⁷.

It was in this context that Karol Józef Wojtyła, the Archbishop of Kraków, was elected Pope John Paul II on October 16, 1978, marking the first time in 455 years that a non-Italian had been elected as Pope. His selections were widely recognized as a sign of the Holy Spirit's action, moving the Church toward a more universal and pastoral vision in response to the needs of the time. The election is a clear example of how, in moments of transition and challenge, the Church relies not on human calculation alone, but on the discernment and guidance of the Holy Spirit, who continues to lead and renew the people of God. As a Catholic priest from the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church and a member of the Diocese of Trivandrum, Kerala, I recall with divine happiness that Pope John Paul II visited our cathedral in Trivandrum on February 8, 1986. He sat in silence for many minutes within the cathedral⁸. As the 264th pope, John Paul's 26-year pontificate left an indelible mark on the Church and the world. His leadership, marked by a deep reliance on the Holy Spirit, helped guide the Church through times of transformation and challenge. This enduring legacy was recognized when Pope John Paul II was canonized as a saint by Pope Francis on April

⁵ Cf. «Cardinal Re».

⁶ Cf. «Cardinal Re».

⁷ Cf. «How Does the Holy Spirit Choose the Next Pope?».

⁸ Cf. «Malankara Catholic».

27, 2014, during a historic ceremony in St. Peter's Square, Vatican. On the same day, Pope John XXIII was also canonized as a saint, which can be seen as the lasting impact of both pontiffs, who, in their unique ways, cooperated with the Holy Spirit in renewing and guiding the Church for a new era.

The election of Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, from a Pope who had been widely loved by the people and who was among the people, to the election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI in 2005 offers a clear example of how the Catholic Church understands the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the selection of a Pope. The Cardinals, gathered in the Sistine Chapel, invoked the Holy Spirit through prayer and discernment, seeking wisdom and clarity for the good of the Church. However, as Benedict XVI himself explained both before and after his election, the Holy Spirit does not directly select the pope or dictate the outcome of the conclave. Instead, the Spirit worked as a gentle guide, inspiring and enlightening the cardinals as they used their judgment to choose the leader best suited for the Church's needs at that moment⁹. But it should be clearly and philosophically understood, the process of election of a Pope is marked by both human freedom and divine assistance: the cardinals may be influenced by personal perspectives or practical considerations, but their openness to the Spirit's promptings helps ensure that the Church is not abandoned or left without direction¹⁰. Even when the outcome may not seem ideal from a human perspective, the holy spirit continues to guide and protect the Church, ensuring its fundamental mission and integrity are preserved. Benedict XVI's pontificate, marked by theological depth and humility, reflected his understanding of this dynamic cooperation between human responsibility and divine guidance. Thus, in every papal election, including that of Benedict XVI, the church's faith rests not in a miraculous selection, but in the enduring presence of the holy spirit, who works through the discernment and freedom of the Church's leaders to sustain and guide the people of God. Some may say that Pope Benedict XVI was a theologian rather than a Pope with a pastoral mind. But for me, the decision of Pope Benedict XVI to resign from the papacy stands as a profound example of being led by the Holy Spirit. Recognizing his declining strength and after much prayerful discernment, Benedict freely chose the step down, describing his act as the fruit of

⁹ Cf. Cardinal Ratzinger giving response to the question of Bavarian television in 1997, if the Holy Spirit is responsible for the election of a pope., «The Holy Spirit Does Not Choose the Pope».

¹⁰ Cf. «On the role of the Holy Spirit in papal elections».

“a serene trust in God’s will and deep love of Christ’s Church.”¹¹ The resignation in 2013 by Pope Benedict XVI was a rare moment in Church history, as papal resignations have occurred only a few times over the centuries. Notably, Pope Celestine V in 1294 and Pope Gregory XII in 1415 also stepped down for the good of the Church during times of crisis. More than the history of a pope's humility in stepping down from the Papacy was the result of deep prayer and discernment, trusting in the Holy Spirit’s guidance, by humbly relinquishing the papacy and dedicating himself to a Life of prayer for his successor and the Church, Benedict XVI gave a powerful witness to spiritual freedom and the ongoing actions of the Holy Spirit in leading the Church, even through extraordinary transitions. Benedict XVI’s humble resignation, guided by prayer and trust in the Holy Spirit, marked a historic transition for the Church and demonstrated that even in moments of uncertainty, the Spirit does not abandon God’s people. As Benedict withdrew to a life of prayer, the church once again entrusted itself to the Spirit’s guidance in electing a new shepherd. This trust was affirmed when Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was chosen as Pope Francis on March 13, 2013, the first pope from Latin America and the first Jesuit pope in history.

Pope Francis’s election was again a clear expression of the Holy Spirit's continued guidance, as evidenced by the selection of a pope who consistently renewed his attention to the marginalized, the poor, and those on the peripheries of society¹². From the first salutation of Pope Francis in the balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica, “*Buona sera*”, which catches the people’s heart, to the last salutation of Pope Francis on the day of Easter to the People, “*Cari fratelli e sorelle*”, shows a journey with People of God, guided by Holy Spirit. For us, as members, readers, or someone close to the heart of the community, “*Sementes di Cerbo, Pro Mundi Vita*,” we can never forget the day with Pope Francis, the opportunity we had to see the Holy Father on 19 October 2023. Whenever I saw the photo of Pope Francis with our Mother Maria Sarah and with the selected community members on the public audience day in the Vatican, I always see the divine attachment of the holy father to our community; I am sure the Holy Father will be praying for us.

While the Catholic church has always trusted in the guidance and protection of the Holy Spirit, especially in the selection of its Popes, recent events have highlighted the contrast between this spiritual confidence and the expectations of the media and public. When Pope Francis’s health

¹¹ Cf. «Last General Audience of Pope Benedict XVI, 27 February 2013 | BENEDICT XVI».

¹² Cf. O’CONNEL, «Pope Francis».

declined and he began using a cane or went into a wheelchair, the media outlets and social media quickly speculated about the end of his papacy and possible successors, often treating the process like a political race.¹³ Stories circulated, rumors spread. Candidate lists appeared, along with speculations about the resignation of Pope Francis, as well as Pope Benedict, suggesting that the next pope could be predicted or chosen by public opinion. Yet, the Church's tradition is clear. While the world may speculate, the election of a pope is ultimately entrusted to Prayerful discernment and the quiet work of the Holy Spirit, not to media narrative or popular forecasts or creations of WhatsApp universities. The church is not an institution, nor to do social work or run an NGO; it is guided, protected, and loved in the Trinitarian compassion and unity. The cardinals who are voting in the Sistine Chapel in complete secrecy and by hearing the announcement "*Extra Omnes*" are asked to leave the chapel. Still, millions of faithful are praying for the Cardinal, and especially for the church. Some may think it's only a historical moment of seeing the black smoke or white smoke on the top of the Vatican Sistine Chapel. Still, I firmly believe it is the prayerful waiting of the sheep for the new shepherd, with prayers, with rosary, with tears. We are praying for the church; we are crying "*Viva il Papa*," let the Pope live long. It's not shouting out for an emperor, but it's the prayers of the ordinary faithful of the Catholic Church, protected by the Holy Spirit. The church remains confident that, beyond all speculations, the Spirit continues to guide and provide the shepherd needed for each new era.

Thus, we all get him the "*The Great Fisherman*," the remarkable journey of Robert Francis Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV, is a testament to the enduring guidance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Catholic church. Born in Chicago in 1955, Prevost's vocation was shaped by Augustinian spirituality, a missionary heart, and a reputation for humble service qualities that would define his rise from parish priest to the papacy. Following the death of Pope Francis on April 21, 2025, the conclave of 133 Cardinals from over 70 nations convened, seeking the Spirit's guidance in a time of transition. The cardinals select the successor to St. Peter, the 267th pope, on May 8th, 2025, marking a historic moment. We all heard "*Habemus Papam*": the first American-born and Peruvian citizen to ascend to the papacy, as well as the first pope from the Order of Saint Augustine. And Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost selected the name, Pope Leo XIV. Pope Leo XIV's first public appearance reflected the spiritual depth and simplicity that have made his ministry. With a calm

¹³ Cf. E. POVOLEDO, «When It Comes to Pope's Health, Vatican Obfuscation Meets a Rumor Mill».

and joyful presence, his shaky hands and teary eyes made it easy for the world to see a new shepherd to see his folk and reminded him of the great responsibility as the vicar of Christ to walk with the people with courage and God's presence. He addressed the world in an accessible Italian and heartfelt Spanish, invoking the intercession of Mary of Pompei and calling for love, peace, and dialogue as the hallmarks of his pontificate¹⁴. His motto, "*In Illo Uno Unum*" (in the One, We Are One), encapsulated his commitment to unity in diversity and echoes his lifelong dedication to bringing people together in Christ. The selection and maintenance of the motto also have a connection with Pope Leo XIII, from whom Pope Leo XIV took the name in succession. Let's discuss that later, maybe in another article. In the story of Pope Leo XIV, the Church once again witnessed that worldly calculations or media publications do not shape its leadership, but the quiet, persistent work of the Holy Spirit. From the suburbs of Chicago to the communities of Peru and the heart of Rome, Leo XIV's election affirms that the Spirit continues to call forth shepherds who embody humility, compassion, and a missionary zeal for the people of God. As this new chapter begins, the Church moves forward in hope, trusting that, as always, it is the Holy Spirit who guides, unites, and renews the Body of Christ.

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¹⁴ Cf. «Who is Robert Prevost, the new Pope Leo XIV and first American pope?».

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