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Jesuits gather in Rome to elect new "black pope"



Reuters Photo: The 'Black Pope,' Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach (L), is shown in this file photo with former...

By Philip Pullella
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ROME (Reuters) - There won't be any white smoke to tell the world he has been elected, but another sort of secret conclave began in Rome on Monday -- to chose the worldwide Jesuit leader who is known as the "the black pope."

At Jesuit headquarters a block from the Vatican, 225 delegates from around the world will choose a new superior general to run the largest and perhaps most influential, controversial and prestigious Catholic clerical order.

Their leader is traditionally known as "the black pope" because of the color of the simple cassock he wears and because -- like the pope who dresses in white -- he has worldwide influence and usually keeps the position for life.

But this year's general congregation, as the meeting is known, is different. The current superior general, Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, 79, received permission from Pope Benedict to retire for reasons of age.

A soft-spoken Dutchman with white hair and a goatee, Kolvenbach has been in the job since 1983 and has won widespread praise for steering the Jesuits through one of their most difficult periods in their 468-year history.

Kolvenbach's charismatic predecessor, a Basque named Pedro Arrupe, had several conflicts with Benedict's predecessor, Pope John Paul, who believed the order had become too independent, leftist and political, particularly in Latin America.

When Arrupe suffered a stroke in the early 1980s Pope John Paul appointed a personal delegate to run the order to make sure it would not drift further leftwards, a move some Jesuits at the time resented as "papal martial law."

Kolvenbach, by contrast, has been credited with re-establishing good relations with the Vatican over the past 25 years while dealing with issues such as declining vocations and the future of the order founded by St Ignatius Loyola in 1540.

DECLINING VOCATIONS

In the 1960s, the all-male order officially known as the Society of Jesus peaked with some 36,000 members worldwide. It now has about 19,200 members involved in education, refugee help and other social services.

The election of Kolvenbach's successor is expected to take place in mid-January after days of prayer and what is known in Latin as "murmuratio," or murmurings, among the delegates about who might make a good superior general.

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While politicking for the post is strictly banned -- delegates are obliged to 'turn in' anyone who actively seeks the top job -- some names have already circulated in religious media.

One is Father Lisbert D'Sousa of [India](#), and some Jesuits have said it is time for the top job to go to someone from the developing world.

"This (the developing world) is not only the new center of gravity for the Society of Jesus but for the Church," Father [James Martin](#) wrote in America, the weekly of the U.S. Jesuits.

"And an election of a developing world general would be interesting as a possible bellwether for the next papal conclave, whenever that will be," he wrote.

The new Jesuit leader is elected by a secret ballot. After he is chosen, the delegates are not allowed to leave the room until [Pope Benedict](#) is informed, in keeping with a centuries-old tradition that the "white pope" be the first to know who the new "black pope" is.

But unlike a conclave to elect the real pope, a Jesuit general congregation can continue for weeks or even months after the new head has been elected in order to discuss the order's future challenges and priorities

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