

conclave

Black smoke, the world waits for the next Pope

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Despite the input of chemistry, the first puff of smoke from the Sistine chimney appeared white. The long delay compared to initial expectations was undoubtedly a factor: everyone gathered for judgement at 7 p.m. and then had to wait another two hours for the first voting results. And the smoke was black, indeed very black.

The delay was to be expected as there are 18 more electors than in 2013. The

procession and the oath took longer than expected, and then, after the 'extra omnes', it was the turn of the octogenarian Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa to give a meditation described as 'kilometric'. The preparatory work must have taken a long time, partly because only 27 of the 133 Cardinals had taken part in 2013 were familiar with how this fascinating but complex machine works.

Despite the numerous security barriers and strict controls, St Peter's Square was crowded thanks to a sunny afternoon and the desire to witness an historical event. It had already been said that it would be almost impossible to see the new Pope today, but the "fear" of perhaps missing the moment led thousands of faithful, pilgrims and tourists to gather in St Peter's Square and scrutinise the specially erected chimney. The human tide filled the entire Via della Conciliazione, right up to the new Piazza Pia. Giant screens showed images of the procession from the Pauline Chapel and the oath in the Sistine Chapel.

When Monsignor Diego Ravelli pronounced the "extra omnes" with determination, applause broke out from the colonnade, led by the "phalanx" of nuns. While waiting for the smoke to clear, the crowd in the square was mistakenly convinced that the moment had arrived, began applauding and shouting only then to realise it was a false alarm. The communal terraces of the buildings surrounding the dome were more crowded than ever. The view was privileged, but like the people in the square, their gaze was fixed on the same spot: the temporary chimney, so aesthetically 'normal' but with such an incredibly important task. Every now and then, breaking the rules and almost breaking the mood an 'unsuspecting' seagull would rest next to the chimney and watch the spectacle below.

Yesterday's square, with thousands of cameras pointed at the roof of the Sistine Chapel, is the Church's response to the public opinion that is constantly and prejudicially hostile towards it. It is a sign of strength that comes not from countless and increasingly generous "openings" to modernity, but from a ritual that dates back to the last decades of the 15th century and was maintained even when the conclaves were held in the Quirinale and not in the Sistine Chapel. At 9.01 pm, the crowd in the square was overcome with emotion as the first puffs of smoke began to rise from the chimney - and the colour left no doubt: black.

The Pope had not been elected, but it would have been surprising if he had been. As the already dark sky over Rome turned even blacker around the dome, the crowd immediately began to leave in a steady stream towards Via della Conciliazione. Some priests and nuns remained in the square, praying the rosary, in every language

imaginable. The answer to their prayers has only been postponed. But until when?