

The Sistine Chapel is a chapel in the Apostolic Palace, the official residence of the Pope, in Vatican City. Originally known as the *Cappella Magna* ('Great Chapel'), the chapel takes its name from Pope Sixtus IV, who restored it between 1473 and 1481. Since that time, the chapel has served as a place of both religious and functionary papal activity. Today, it is the site of the papal conclave, the process by which a new Pope is selected. The fame of the Sistine Chapel lies mainly in the frescos that decorate the interior, most particularly the Sistine Chapel ceiling and *The Last Judgment* by Michelangelo. During the reign of Sixtus IV, a team of Renaissance painters created a series of frescos depicting the *Life of Moses* and the *Life of Christ*, offset by papal portraits above and drapery below. These paintings were completed in 1482, and on August 15, 1483 Sixtus IV celebrated the first mass in the Sistine Chapel for the Feast of the Assumption, at which ceremony the chapel was consecrated and dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Between 1508 and 1512, under the patronage of Pope Julius II, Michelangelo painted the chapel's ceiling, a project which changed the course of Western art and is regarded as one of the major artistic accomplishments of human civilization. He painted a series of nine pictures showing *God's Creation of the World*, *God's Relationship with Mankind*, and *Mankind's Fall from God's Grace*. On the large pendentives he painted twelve Biblical and Classical men and women who prophesied that God would send Jesus Christ for the salvation of mankind, and around the upper parts of the windows, the *Ancestors of Christ*. He returned from 1535 to 1541 and painted *The Last Judgment* for Popes Clement VII and Paul III. One of the functions of the Sistine Chapel is as a venue for the election of each successive Pope in a conclave of the College of Cardinals. On the occasion of a conclave, a chimney is installed in the roof of the chapel, from which smoke arises as a signal. If white smoke appears, which is created by burning the ballots of the election, a new Pope has been elected. If no candidate receives the required two-thirds vote, the cardinals send up black smoke—created by burning the ballots along with wet straw and chemical additives—it means that no successful election has yet occurred.

The first papal conclave to be held in the Sistine Chapel was the conclave of 1492, which took place from August 6 - 11, 1492 in which Pope Alexander VI was elected. The conclave also provided for the cardinals a space in which they could hear mass, and in which they could eat, sleep, and pass time attended by servants. From 1455, conclaves have been held in the Vatican; until the Great Schism, they were held in the Dominican convent of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. Since 1996, John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution requires the cardinals to be lodged in the Domus Sanctae Marthae during a papal conclave, but to continue to vote in the Sistine Chapel. Canopies for each cardinal-elect were once used during conclaves—a sign of equal dignity. After the new Pope accepts his election, he would give his new name; at this time, the other Cardinals would tug on a rope attached to their seats to lower their canopies. Until reforms instituted by Saint Pius X, the canopies were of different colors to designate which Cardinals had been appointed by which Pope. Paul VI abolished the canopies altogether, since, under his papacy, the population of the College of Cardinals had increased so much to the point that they would need to be seated in rows of two against the walls, making the canopies obstruct the view of the cardinals in the back row. In the wake of a conclave taking place to preserve the integrity of the marble floor on the Sistine Chapel, carpenters install a slightly elevated wooden floor alongside a wooden ramp in the entrance for those Cardinals who for one reason or another need to be transported in a wheelchair.

The Sistine Chapel as it may have appeared in the 15th century (19th century drawing); and The Sistine Chapel 2017. The fame of Michelangelo's paintings has drawn multitudes of visitors to the chapel ever since they were revealed five hundred years ago.

