

What name might the new pope take?

UPDATED March 19

We learned six days ago that Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio had been elected by his fellow cardinals as the 266th pope, and took the name Francis I.

Though no pope had ever taken that name before, it was in my list as a possibility.

It could signal, as I noted, that Pope Francis may, like Francis of Assisi, “rebuild my church.” It could also be a reflection of Cardinal Bergoglio’s humble manner. He is reported to ride the bus, live in a simple apartment and cook his own meals. He is known by many in his archdiocese of Buenos Aires as “Father Jorge.

It would seem obvious that his days of riding the bus are over. Many are not safe from pickpockets and other dangers on Rome’s #62 bus that passes by St. Peter’s.

Click [here](#) to read about Pope Francis’ reasoning behind choosing St. Francis of Assisi’s name. We will certainly learn more about the new pope in the coming days and weeks.

Welcome, Pope Francis.

At a Vatican news conference this morning, Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, the director of Toronto-based Salt + Light TV who is assisting the Vatican press office with English- and French-speaking journalists, noted that there is no way to know the new papal name until he is elected and makes his choice. The new pope does not have to explain why he chose the name, though Benedict XVI did so.

The first pope to change his name appears to be John II, whose birth name was Mercurius. He apparently decided that having the name of a pagan god was not good form for a pope. Most popes since then have taken a new name – either of a saint or a previous pope (sometimes both).



The most common papal name is John, with 23 iterations of that already (and the “September Pope,” John Paul I, honored his predecessors John XXIII and Paul VI, and John Paul II honored all three of his predecessors by taking the same name). Benedict and Gregory come in tied for second with 16 each.

Without taking into account every papal name that has been used, here is a list compiled in the last couple of weeks of the possible names for the new pope. Along with the name are some comments on the likelihood of that choice.

- **Benedict XVII:** Possible, if the new pontiff wants to honor both his immediate

predecessor and St. Benedict. Unlikely, though, because we would have two living Pope Benedicts (one retired, one active) and both the new pope and emeritus pope will want to eliminate any confusion.

- **John Paul III:** Perhaps not likely, while we await a second miracle for the canonization of Blessed John Paul; he may wish for his name to not interfere with people's memory of John Paul II's long and prolific pontificate, which some people contend will one day result in Blessed John Paul being known as "St. John Paul the Great."

- **Paul VII:** High possibility, as it would pay tribute to the pontiff who concluded the Second Vatican Council and implemented changes in the liturgy, and honor the Apostle Paul.

- **John XXIV:** Pays tribute to Blessed John XXIII, who convened Vatican II, and as noted, is the most common papal name.

- **Pius XIII:** Less likely while the debate continues to rage over Pius XII's role during World War II. If Pius XII is eventually canonized, that might clear the way for the name to be used again, but now might be untimely. By the way, the Irish betting site Paddy Power currently has Leo at 6/5 odds of being selected. (However, it's not worth putting a lot of stock in that, necessarily, since the site also lists Peter at 9/2 odds; by tradition, out of respect for their historic role, no other pope has taken the name Peter or Linus, the first two popes.)

- **Leo XIV:** A good chance for this one. Author and Vaticanista George Weigel notes that the reforms we are currently experiencing in the church did not begin with Vatican II, but with the papacy of Leo XIII in the late 19th century. If the new pope wants to allude to Leo's charism of change and Catholic social teaching, he could choose to honor him by taking his name.

- **Gregory XVII:** Second most common papal name, and lots of reasons to choose it.

- **Clement XV:** (see also, O'Malley note, below)

- **Innocent XIV:** (unlikely; in these days with the sexual abuse crisis, etc., the name Innocent might be mocked by many in the media and in the streets)

- **Alexander VIII:** Low likelihood. Alexander VII commissioned St. Peter's Square (a plus), but Alexander VI had a great-great-great grandson who became pope (Innocent X) and that could call attention to past concerns about the papal families in the Middle Ages.

- **Urban IX:** Not likely, as this would recall the pope who began the trial of Galileo Galilei, whose persecution by the church was later renounced.

- **Marcellus III:** Low possibility. The popes named Marcellinus and Marcellus reigned a long time ago; Marcellus II was the last to use his birth name (Marcello) as his papal name.

- **Julius IV:** This line includes a saint (Julius I) but last Julius was in the 1500s. A long shot.
- **Adrian/Hadrian VII:** Boosting the odds, Adrian VI was the last non-Italian to be named pope before John Paul II (Karol Wojtyla of Poland), so a non-Italian pope might choose this. Deflating the odds: There is a stage play called “Hadrian VII,” which is about a man who converts to Catholicism, ordained a priest and by a fluke is elected pope. A new pope might not want to encourage comparisons to the fictional Hadrian.
- **Martin VI:** The last Pope Martin was in the 15th century, but a pope from Latin America might choose this name, partly to honor St. Marin de Porres, who was born and ministered in Peru.
- **Boniface X:** Low likelihood, but Boniface IV was a Benedictine and was canonized.
- **Celestine VI:** this choice could honor Celestine V, who resigned the papacy, and so in some way honor Benedict XVI, who may have telegraphed his intention to resign if he determined it wise by leaving his pallium at Celestine’s tomb on a visit to L’Aquila in 2009.
- **Joseph I:** Unusual, because it hasn’t been done before, but it has a good chance for a few reasons. If the new pope wants to pay tribute to Benedict XVI/Joseph Ratzinger, but doesn’t want to take the name Benedict, he could be the first Pope Joseph. This could also honor St. Joseph, Universal patron of the church, and it is possible the new pope could be installed on his feast, March 19.
- **Francis I:** If the new pope wants to send a message that he plans to “rebuild my church,” as Christ said when the crucifix spoke to St. Francis of Assisi, this could be a possibility. It, too, would be unusual since there has been no Pope Francis before now, although four Franciscans have become pope. If the conclave confirms the buzz in Rome in the last few weeks about Cardinal Seán O’Malley of Boston and elects him, he might choose Francis to honor the founder of his religious order.
- Three more names come to mind if it’s Cardinal O’Malley or another who wants to honor Francis and the Franciscans: Clement XV, Sixtus VI (there have been two Franciscan popes named Sixtus) and Nicholas VI.

My bet: Leo XIV. *Second choice:* Joseph I.

Related article:

Pope Francis explains why he chose St. Francis of Assisi’s name