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Students select ?new pope? in mock conclave

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Students from St. Louis Catholic School here erupted in cheers as Ghanaian Cardinal Peter Turkson was elected the "new pope" during a mock conclave held at a gym-turned-"Sistine Chapel" March 4.

The "conclave" explained the pope selection process in a tangible way. Middle schoolers acted as cardinals, Swiss Guards, priests, sisters, nurses, reporters and security personnel to re-enact a conclave for the whole school.

"It was a lot of fun for them just to dress the part but they really got into it. Some even picked this or that cardinal they knew [of]," said Fr. Matthew Zuberbueler, pastor of St. Louis, which is in the Arlington diocese. "During the selection, they were very solemn. Every word mattered."

The 34 "cardinals" of St. Louis School included well-known members of the College of Cardinals, along with representatives of all the continents. The "cardinals" spent two weeks learning about their specific role in the church and following media speculation about who was likely to replace Pope Benedict XVI.

The rest of the school learned about the cardinals' native continents to prepare for the conclave. On March 1, the "cardinals" visited the elementary school classrooms to introduce themselves.

"It's a really good experience for us to learn what really happens in Rome," said John Ferguson, a seventh-grader who played Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet.

During the "conclave," the cardinals swore secrecy before casting their votes. A security team checked for recording devices before the cardinals processed in.

To show all aspects of the process, Zuberbueler designated a cardinal to be "sick," so the students would see what happens if a cardinal is ill during the conclave.

The "conclave" aimed to be as realistic as possible. Volunteers sewed costumes for the cardinals, made ballots in Latin, transformed the gym into the Sistine Chapel and built the balcony from which the new "pope" would greet the church.

Daniel Baillargeon, St. Louis principal, said that the activity invigorated the students' faith.

"Understanding is critical for evangelization," Baillargeon told the Arlington Catholic Herald, the diocesan newspaper. "Sometimes we just assume that the children would be excited about this, but it is our responsibility to share our excitement with them."

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