

# The Vatican City



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon  
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**THE** conclave of 115 cardinals from all over the Roman Catholic world elected a new Pope on 13 March, 2013, to succeed Pope Benedict XVI who abdicated because of poor health.

The cardinals started the election process on 12 March and it was after the fifth round of voting that 76-year-old Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina was elected to become the new Pope, the 266th in the Church's 2,000-year history.

As soon as the new Pope was elected, white smoke was seen rising from the temporary chimney above the roof of Sistine Chapel in Vatican City and the bell of St. Peter's Basilica tolled to announce the news to the world.

The new Pope named himself Pope Francis I, after St. Francis of Assisi. Sistine Chapel is the Pope's official private chapel located in the museum complex that is housed in an extremely large rectangular building adjoining, but perpendicular to St. Peter's Basilica.

Its ceiling frescoes, painted by Michelangelo around 1508, depict scenes from the Old Testament. More than 20 years later, the Renaissance artist painted "The Last Judgement" on the altar wall of the chapel. The other walls were decorated by several prominent painters of the period – Pinturicchio, Perugino, Botticelli and Ghirlandaio.

Michelangelo's ceiling frescoes and "The Last Judgement" are probably the most viewed paintings in the world; it is estimated that on an average day, about 15,000 visitors trudge through the chapel to admire the masterpieces.

When my wife and I visited in September 2011, the chapel was packed with tourists. Photography was not

allowed but many tourists just could not resist the temptation to sneak a shot or two, and that included me.

Situated on the west bank of the Tiber River, just across from the city centre of Rome, Vatican City was established as a sovereign State in 1929, a tiny territory surrounded by high walls on its far western side. St. Peter's Basilica and the colonnaded piazza in front of it are not surrounded by walls. The Basilica, built on the site of St. Peter's tomb and worked on by the greatest Italian architects of the 16th and 17th Centuries, is the principal shrine of the Catholic Church. Its interior is lavishly decorated with priceless sculptures and paintings of Italian masters.

The enormity of the church is best appreciated from the gallery that runs around the interior of the 41.5m diameter dome. From the roof, one has an impressive overview of St. Peter's Piazza, where colonnade arms symbolically welcome the world into the lap of the Catholic Church.

A few days before we went to Rome, we visited St. Francis Basilica in Assisi, a small town near Perugia in the province of Umbria, about 100km north of Rome.

St. Francis is Italy's premier saint and founder of the Franciscan order. He was born in Assisi in 1182. Started in 1228, two years after the saint's death, St Francis Basilica is made up of two churches, one built on top of the other. It has one of the most overwhelming collections of art outside a gallery anywhere in the world. ■

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