

Pope Francis injects new blood into cardinals club

ROME
Vatican City

Pope Francis on Wednesday created five new cardinals in a Vatican ceremony that, while deeply traditional in form, also reflected his vision of a reshaped Church for the 21st century.

Four of the five new cardinals come from countries that have never had a cardinal before: El Salvador, Laos, Mali and Sweden. The fifth is from Spain.

In a hard-hitting homily, Francis told them they should regard themselves as servants of the most vulnerable and not be misled by the traditional description of cardinals as the 'Princes of the Church'.

The world they had to deal with, Francis said, was "the innocent who suffer and die as victims of war and terrorism; the forms of enslavement that continue to violate human dignity, even in the age of human rights; the refugee camps, which at times seem more like a hell than a purgatory; the systematic discarding of all that is no longer useful, people included".

Experts say Francis's latest choice of cardinals reflects his desire to reach out to the peripheries of the global Catholic community, a recurring theme of his papacy.

Three of the new appointments are from countries with only small minority Catholic congregations.

As well as expanding its global footprint, the appointments increase the size of the electoral college that will select the next pope to 121 members, 49 of whom have been appointed since he became pope in March 2013.

Blood spilled

"I think it reflects what Francis is about, for him to create cardinals from Laos, Mali and Sweden," said one of the new appointments, Sweden's



This handout picture released by the Vatican press office shows Pope Francis and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI during a meeting with new Cardinals, from right, Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhakhoun, Laos; Anders Arborelius, Sweden; Gregorio Rosa Chavez, El Salvador; Juan Jose Omella, Spain and Jean Zerbo, Mali, after the ceremony of their elevation at the Vatican on Wednesday. AFP photo

BETWEEN THE LINES: The ordination of the new cardinals

■ After vowing obedience to the Church and the Pope, each of the five knelt before Francis to receive their cardinal's hat, a ring and a title linking them to a church in Rome.

Anders Arborelius.

The Bishop of Stockholm told AFP he had been shocked to learn of his impending elevation.

"A priest showed me the announcement on the Internet — at first I thought it was a joke," Arborelius said.

His new colleague, Juan Omella, the

Bishop of Barcelona, concurred.

"The Pope has a very universal vision. He wants to strengthen the areas on the margins, where the Church is growing," he said in an interview ahead of Wednesday's consistory, as the formal swearing-in is known.

After vowing obedience to the

Church and the Pope, each of the five knelt before Francis, to receive their cardinal's hat, a ring and a title linking them to a church in Rome.

As he placed the four-peaked "birettas" on their heads, Francis reminded the new cardinals, in Latin, that their scarlet colour was a symbol of the blood they must be prepared to spill for their faith.

Then, as other popes have done since cardinals were first appointed nearly 1,000 years ago, Francis handed over the Papal Bull, or decree, that formalises the creation of new members.

Church for the poor

The latest appointments continue a recent trend towards increasing the representation of Asia, Africa and Latin America within the college of cardinals at the expense of European and North American clerics.

But those latter areas remain hugely influential, making up 56% of the college. Italy alone has more than a fifth (24) of cardinals eligible to vote in the conclave that elects popes.

El Salvador's first cardinal, Gregorio Rosa Chavez, was a close friend of Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran archbishop slain by a death squad as he gave mass in 1980, during the Central American state's brutal civil war.

Often portrayed as an advocate of liberation theology, Romero shared Francis's belief that the Church should be at the service of the poor.

"He should be here in my place," Rosa Chavez told AFP. "He is a cardinal by martyr's blood."

Altogether, there are now 225 cardinals around the world, but those over 80 are not allowed to vote.

One, former Scottish Archbishop Keith O'Brien, renounced his voting rights after being forced to step down over predatory sexual conduct with student priests.

Jean Zerbo's appointment as Mali's first cardinal was partly overshadowed by a scandal embroiling the Church in the mostly-Muslim African state.

Zerbo was named in press reports at the end of May as one of three Church officials in Mali to have access to 12 million euros held in several accounts at a private bank in Switzerland. The Church in Mali has denied any wrongdoing.

AFP