The election of Pope Francis I was significant because the Catholic Church is the world’s third largest human organization. With a membership of 1.1 billion, the church’s size is exceeded only by the countries of China (1.3 billion) and India (1.2 billion). Taken together, more than half of the world’s 7 billion people are either Chinese, Indian or Catholic.

More importantly, the Church of Rome has been the central, constant feature in the growth of Western Civilization since its founding nearly two millennia ago. During that time, it has played a number of different roles; its power has waxed and waned; and it has been endorsed and criticized. But it has always been there. Much of the character of today’s “Western World,” or in economic terms the “First World,” has been shaped in line with or in opposition to Catholicism.

Given this stature, we should analyze what the papal election reveals about the church’s concept of God before our memory of the media blitz fades away.

The pope was chosen in the traditional manner. All the church’s cardinals gathered, went into a secret conclave in the Sistine Chapel and voted. As in past elections, the choice was not made on a single ballot, but took several. This conclave was fairly short, just two days; others have taken longer. Perhaps this was helped by the days of meetings beforehand, much like a business convention, where the cardinals got to know one another and shared their views of the state of the Catholic Church in both formal and informal sessions. According to media reports, they discussed the challenges facing the church, its present successes and accomplishments, and its future needs.

The cardinals’ votes and meetings show the human procedures the church undertakes to identify a new leader. God does not put in an appearance and publicly announce His choice. Nor does an Old-Testament-style prophet step forward to convey God’s word. God’s will, to use religious language, is instead sought by the cardinals through prayer, confession and shared worship.

This approach fits traditional Catholic theology nicely. The church understands its role as mediating between God and Christian believers. Its hierarchical organization places cardinals closest to God, and so they are best positioned to listen for and follow divine promptings. In a pope’s election, God reveals His will through them.

The human character of the pope was emphasized in Pope Benedict as well. In his decision to step down, Benedict showed he understood that his increasing frailness of both body and mind was beginning to hamper his ability to lead the church. He could no longer function as the “Vicar of Jesus Christ.”

In the past, it was believed that God would make this choice and that the pope would die at a moment of God’s choosing. But with the advent of modern medicine, it has become clear that this is no longer the case. Diseases that would quickly result in death just two decades ago can now be easily overcome and life extended for years.

But with long life often comes increasing mental and physical weakness, as is well known by people with elderly parents. A pope, like all human beings, experiences the diminution of old age, interfering with and ultimately preventing the fulfillment of his papal role, and even the ability to look after himself. Pope Benedict’s decision to step down was a recognition of this.

So the Catholic Church reveals God through its human members; He is mediated through humanity. Catholics certainly believe the pope is chosen by God, but the process reveals that the choice is mediated through and conveyed by human beings. It is not a revelation, but a group decision made by a majority (not a unanimity) of several dozen men. The face of God in this process is a human face.

Catholics may believe that God is unchanging and unchangeable, but human beings are not. Our increasing knowledge of humans’ physical, mental and social character, as well as the increasing role of technology in our lives, alters the way humans relate to the divine and to each other. In the end, it brings about changes even in the Catholic Church.