

# A Seminarian's Experience in Rome during the Papal Conclave

by Michael Conway

As I write this, it has been roughly 100 days since Pope Francis was installed as the 266th successor of Saint Peter. I was blessed enough to have a front-row seat, as it were, to the entire of the proceedings: from the earth-shaking announcement of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation to the cardinals assembling in general congregation and then in the conclave; from St. Peter's Square brimming over with Catholics from every corner of the globe to a humble Argentinean Jesuit being elected pope and taking the name of one of Italy's – if not the world's – most beloved saints.

So what has it all been like? In a word, surreal. That may not be a very satisfying answer, and maybe it seems like I'm taking the easy way out with it, but it's quite true. I'll tell the story from the beginning. The day that Pope Benedict made his announcement was a Monday. I didn't have class that day – the university was still in the final exam session, but I had finished all of my tests – so it was going to be a sort of “light” day for me – a chance to catch up on some mundane tasks that had fallen aside. At one point I took a break and thought I'd see what was going on in the world of Facebook – and saw that one of my old college buddies had posted something about the Pope “quitting.” Now, he does have a sense of humor, but he also works for a major media company, so there was a chance what he was saying had some truth to it. Sure enough, I verified it through another American media outlet as well as some Italian newspapers – the Pope was resigning!

The atmosphere of the seminary changed almost immediately. It had been quiet during exams, but now it was remarkably somber. Somber is not something that 250 men in their 20s and 30s normally do well. It was almost like a funeral home. Luckily for us, the archbishop-emeritus of Washington, DC, Theodore Cardinal McCarrick, happened to be in town that day and was joining us for lunch. He gave an impromptu speech on his experience in the conclave of 2005, saying as much as he could without revealing any secrets, of course. Mainly he talked about how it would be absolutely imperative that the entire Church prayed for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit over the cardinal-electors so that they would elect the right man for the job. (As a bit of a side note: Cardinal McCarrick and Cardinal Bergoglio became cardinals in the same consistory and have been friends ever since. Unconfirmed reports suggest McCarrick was an ardent Bergoglio voter in '05 conclave. He was absolutely thrilled with the '13 results.)

Two days later, the students from the college were making the annual pilgrimage to the church of Santa Sabina to have our Ash Wednesday liturgy. As my group and I were plodding along, we were joined by a priest who looked awfully familiar. In fact, it

was the former archbishop of Baltimore and the current Grand Master of the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher, Edwin Cardinal O'Brien. Unlike many of the other cardinals, he was actually in the room when Pope Benedict made the announcement. The pope had made the announcement in Latin, and the Cardinal ruefully admitted his Latin isn't what it used to be – thus encouraging us to study it harder – but he said he was pretty sure that he understood what the pope said. But he kept asking those standing around him what he said, because he didn't want it to be true. He said everyone was stunned.

After the initial shock wore off – or at least abated a little bit – “regular” life began to resume. The lunch room conversation, which always runs a little theological, had plenty of discussion about the historical and ecclesiastical impacts of what was going on. We decided fairly early on that it would have been poor form for us to bet on who would be elected as the next pope – there was one American cardinal who was more popular than the others, but I'm not naming names – but we did talk a lot about what name the next pope would take. Some were obviously more facetious than others (Lando II comes to mind), but we had some good guesses. I picked Francis. No one believes me now, but I swear I predicted it!

Of course, the closer we got the transition (or *sede vacante*) period, the tougher it got to do things like go to class. I made it to the Square for the pope's final Sunday Angelus. He looked and sounded frail. It was really kind of sad, actually. However, just a few days later I went to his final general audience and he sounded strong – very resolved in his course of action. The afternoon he was to fly from the Vatican to the papal retreat at Castel Gandolfo, we filled our rooftop terrace waving American flags and home-made signs and waited for the pope to fly over. We almost missed him – after takeoff, the helicopter banked away from us – but only to make a “victory lap” around Vatican City before heading for Castel Gandolfo, and flying more or less right overhead of us. And just like that, we had no pope.

The Eucharistic Prayer has a place where the priest inserts the name of the Pope followed by the local bishop – so in Rome these days, it would be, “...for Francis, our pope and bishop...” but during that time, that entire phrase was left unsaid. After seven years of at least hearing Pope Benedict's name get mentioned there, it was a little jarring.

The cardinals, meanwhile, began to arrive in Rome from all corners of the world. Many of the American cardinals chose to stay at the North American College, due in large part to its proximity to Saint Peter's. The media followed closely behind. In that sense, it was very frustrating, because there were always press

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conferences around and a lot of strange people in the building. On the other hand, we had different cardinals celebrating our morning Mass every day. We saw some of these cardinals more often than others, and it was immediately very evident that they were bearing a fairly weighty burden. They were less jovial and certainly looked more haggard. The morning that the conclave was to begin, we lined the driveway and applauded as the bus carrying the cardinals departed, letting them know that we would be supporting them in prayer while they were in conclave.

That first night, everyone went to the Square. No modern Pope was ever elected on the first ballot, and there was no good reason to think that this would be a different case, but that didn't stop us. Nor did the rain stop us. In fact, it didn't stop anyone, as the Square was absolutely packed that evening. Sure enough, right on cue, black smoke came pouring out of the chimney. A collective groan went up from the crowd. Even though we knew there wouldn't be a pope that night, there was still something about just being there that made you think that just maybe it might happen...

The next morning, it was absolutely impossible to pay attention in class. Everyone who had laptops was on the internet, watching the live feed from the Square – if white smoke came out, we could run and make it to the Square in less than 20 minutes – more than enough time to get there before the new pope would come out. But the smoke, when it came, was still black.

That afternoon, following lunch, it seemed the best place to be was the Square. A classmate and I grabbed our umbrellas and an American flag and set out. It took some sweet talking to get the guards to let us into the Square with the flagpole we had, but we did eventually get in. As soon as we raised Old Glory, the media descended on us. Most were from various US newspapers and TV stations, but we also spoke to Australian, Japanese, and Portuguese news outlets, to name a few. Most assumed having the flag there meant we wanted an American to win – and they all wanted to know who. We kept explaining that we didn't care who won, as long as he was a holy priest, and the flag was just to let him know he had the support of American Catholics, but it seemed like the media wasn't buying that. The afternoon wore on, and it rained on and off, but more people gradually kept trickling into the square. Since there was no mid-afternoon smoke, we were guaranteed smoke at about 7:00 PM Rome time – but what color would it be?

7:00 PM came and went. Five minutes passed. Almost ten minutes. Something was up. Finally – a puff of smoke, but it was gray. Then, suddenly, an immense plume of white smoke came billowing out of the chimney, and the bells of the basilica began to ring. The crowd screamed and surged forward, carrying everyone as close to the barricades as we could get it. Sure, there was pushing and shoving, but no one seemed to mind too much

– not that it would have mattered, given the many different languages being spoken in the square that night. Various marching bands marched in, national anthems were played, and then finally the announcement we were all waiting for.

And I missed the cardinal's last name. I clearly heard that he took the name of Francis – but so did everyone else in the Square. Pandemonium ensued. Finally, I was able to get a lady nearby to tell me that it was Bergoglio. "Ma Padre, chi e?" she asked. "Father, who is he?" In very poor Italian, I answered, "He is an Argentinean. And he is a Jesuit!" "Father, a Jesuit pope? But this is impossible! Are you sure?" "Yes, ma'am, he is a Jesuit – we have a Jesuit pope!" I don't think she believed me, because she just walked away. I could scarcely believe it myself – the Jesuits have played such an important role in my education to date, and I have a lot of respect for them – but to have a Jesuit pope just defied expectations.

Describing what it was like when he first stepped outside, or the simple and direct way he spoke, and how he asked the crowd for their blessing that night is basically an impossible task. It was otherworldly. All clichés aside, the presence of the Holy Spirit was palpable that night. It was an amazing experience. I have never experienced the Church in a more universal, catholic way than I did that evening.

To reflect on Pope Francis' installation Mass and the first hundred days of his papacy would take another 2,000 word article – and as it is, this was only supposed to be 1,000 words. Pope Francis is not preaching anything new when he speaks – but he preaches it with unabashed joy and unmatched courage. May we follow his example and make our lives examples of what it means not to be called Catholic Christians, but to actually be Catholic Christians.

*Viva il Papa!*

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