

Holy Smoke!

So there I was. I had just come up the stairs when one of the friars said something which just about took my breath away: “Hey, Monsieur just told me he’s going to Rome for the installation of the new pope, and he’s offered to take one of us with him. Wanna go?” I thought for about a second and a half, and after that it was a greased banana peel.

We were all still reeling from the announcement that Pope Benedict XVI intended to step down, along with the speculation as to who would succeed him. As the cardinals gathered in Rome, and then got sequestered in the Sistine Chapel, the excitement built to a fever pitch. We were all glued to a screen – the technologically challenged to a TV, others to a computer or cell phone or I-pad. That was where we saw the white smoke – which, of course, did not please the seagulls atop the chimney of the Sistine Chapel, but which thrilled the wingless among us. An hour later, the doors above St. Peter’s Square opened, and a nasal French accent intoned: “*Habemus papam!*” It was then that we learned that the new pope was from Argentina and had chosen the name Francis. As the media frantically dug into its files to find out about the newly-elected dark horse candidate, the new pope started to reveal to us just what kind of pope the Holy Spirit had surprised us with.

His first public words as pope: “*Buona sera!*” – literally “Good evening!”, basically just “Hi!” His informal words put everyone at ease, as if the thousands in the square and the billions watching worldwide were but welcome guests in an immense living room. A clerical commentator had compared the ostentatious stone colonnade of St. Peter’s square to the worldwide embrace of the Church; the new pope immediately turned that hyperbole into a reality, offering a big, warm hug.

Warming the heart of this ecclesiologist even more than the folksy talk was the way the new pope referred to himself: gone were terms like “Vicar of Christ” (as if Christ were absent and thus in need of a vicar) and “Supreme Pontiff” (which literally means “ultimate bridge-builder”, but which carries far a different wallop); instead, he referred to himself as the “Bishop of Rome” – which, of course, he is. This speaks volumes about the way he sees the Petrine ministry within the Catholic Communion, as well as the openness with which he sees his relationship to other Churches.

On the huge screen in St. Peter’s Square, I witnessed the way in which these words actually got put into practice. I was thrilled to see that, when Pope Francis went down into the crypt to pray at the tomb of St. Peter, he was joined there by the primates of the Eastern Catholic Churches – including our own +Sviatoslav. Emerging onto the platform, the Bishop of Rome was joined by Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, who had been inspired to set aside centuries of recriminations and mutual mistrust so as to reciprocate the hopeful embrace.

Pope Francis continues to surprise us and to confound those who expect him to conform to their idea of what Church ought to be. Did you see the amazing picture of him attending a liturgy in Rome – not out in front dripping with lace, but rather sitting in the last row, dressed in a simple white cassock and surrounded by Vatican employees? And then there was Holy Thursday, when he washed the feet of prisoners – including (are you sitting down?) a Muslim woman! Holy smoke! What will he do next? Stay tuned!

The new pope has certainly had an impact, and it was a grace to be able to attend his installation – including, I suppose, the exhausting eight hours spent standing in St. Peter’s Square, and the little Italian lady with sharp elbows who seemed totally unaware of the law of physics which says that two bodies (i.e., hers and mine) cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Yes, in spite of the wear-and-tear on my aging body, my *Blitzbesuch* to Rome was indeed a great grace, for which I am thankful.

This was not my first visit to Rome - or to St. Peter’s, for that matter. On my previous trip, I was actually able to get in rather than just standing outside. My reason for going in: to pray at the tomb of the holy martyr Josaphat who had given his life for the unity of Christians. As it turns out, St. Josaphat is entombed very

near Pope John XXIII, who symbolically opened the windows to let some fresh air into musty Church decasteries. Given what we have seen of Pope Francis, he may very well choose to pursue the same priorities as those two holy men. Holy smoke indeed!

-Fr. Jim Karepin, op

