**The Past, Present and Future of Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

*“White smoke”* was all that my friend’s text said.

That was, of course, all that I needed to hear to know that the quiet afternoon I had planned in my office at Catholic University would no longer be so quiet. That text was followed by an invitation to everyone on campus to gather in the student lounge to watch the events of the afternoon unfold and to wait for the announcement of the *gaudium magnum* or “great joy” that we, once again, had a Pope.

So, I gathered with colleagues and many students to spend the afternoon together, both wishing I was in Rome and grateful to be exactly where I was.

When I looked around at the crowd of young students – and they *do* get younger every year! – it was so clear to me that they were natives of the twenty-first century. Almost universally, they held their cell phones in their hands, texting loved ones in far flung places, posting to their social media, searching the web for updates, and tracking the time on smart watches that were the stuff of sci fi just yesterday.

Those who were 18 and 19 years old were not alive during the pontificate of Pope St. John Paul II, the Pope of my own youth and young adulthood. They were just receiving their First Holy Communions around the time that Pope Francis became Pope, and this was likely the first papal conclave that they had watched with an understanding of what was happening.

Yet, for all the ways that they were living so fully in the present, they also gathered with me to watch a ritual that linked us to our past in ways that I may have appreciated more than they did.

They were watching an announcement heralded by quintessentially low-tech white smoke and by simple, albeit exuberant, pealing of bells. The smoke and the sound wafted over the skies of a truly ancient city.

They waited to meet someone who would take his place as the 267th pontiff in a chain that stretches back over two millennia to St. Peter himself.

They watched the Swiss Guards in uniforms designed centuries ago standing guard in front of St. Peter’s Basilica whose cornerstone was laid at the dawn of the sixteenth century. In front of the Basilica rose an obelisk from far earlier times, and surrounding the throngs of pilgrims in St. Peter’s Square was a colonnade that has embraced the world for centuries.

They heard the Pope introduced to the crowds in the ancient Latin language and saw him wearing vestments with a tradition that spans the ages. At his invitation, they prayed the ageless words of the Hail Mary, prayed by saints throughout every era of Christendom, based on words from the Annunciation at the very opening of the New Testament.

They greeted a Pope who took the name Leo. This name he shared with the pontiff who founded their university and led the Church during the years when all four of my grandparents were born.

In the eyes of this generation that follows me, I saw the link to all the generations that came before us and in whose footsteps we are blessed to follow.

In their excitement in the present, I appreciated the bequest of the faith that we received from the past – a faith both ancient and new at the very same time.

In their joy, I saw the past meet the present – and I was filled with great hope for the future of ordinary time.

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