

A practising Catholic's simple wish

In many ways, the new pope is full of surprises -- the first Jesuit, first Latin-American and also the first non-European pope in about 1,300 years.

He is the first Pope Francis and the first to ditch the red papal mozzetta and to wear a simple wooden cross as he emerged onto the balcony of St Peter's basilica.

The very way Pope Francis presented himself is in contrast to his predecessor Benedict XVI. Does it send a powerful message to local bishops, clergy and religious? Will it change those 'line breaks' in the local churches like ours?

I would like to believe these 'firsts' are signs of better things to come in the Church.

I take pride in my Catholic faith not for what the Church can do or cannot, but because I'm a member of the world's largest faith organization. Because I believe that no matter how rich or poor, my joys and hopes, grievances and anxieties count, and there is someone with authority to listen to me.

I am among those faithful whose tiny local Church had no hand in choosing their supreme spiritual leader.

Catholics here are a tiny minority – about 350,000 people in a Muslim-majority country of more than 150 million. In 1986, on the only papal visit to Bangladesh, the late Pope John Paul II called us 'God's little flock,' whose life of faith is influenced by a multi-religious culture, a common reality in churches in Asia.

Most of the 'little flock' considers the pope no less than a demigod.

Most of us are devout and listen to what the pope says and does, rather than caring who he is or where he comes from. They care little (actually they know little) about the clerical abuses and financial scandals, or the dysfunctional Vatican bureaucracy haunting the Church at the moment.

They see the new pope as 'a source of hope and joy' as he comes from a developing country which they too live in, because like the Vatican, the local Church also needs changes.

All these years, the local Church has been a 'light of hope' in the 'vast sea of Islam,' making significant contributions to education, health and development sectors, especially to the poor.

Besides spiritual nourishment, by improving their socio-economic status the Church has developed a small but devout community of faithful. Thus, the laypeople have grown up.

But sadly, they have failed to find a sturdy position in the Church -- either nationally and locally. From episcopal commissions to parish level or at Church programs, with few exceptions, laypeople are merely participants, not decision-makers.

With due respect to the bishops, clergy and Religious who are close to the people, many of their colleagues think that by the virtue of ordination or religious vows they are the be-all and end-all when it comes to the Church.

It's not that laypeople are less educated than the clergy or Religious, or they have too little theological and apostolic training opportunities. Not because they know little about Vatican II and changes in the Church it was intended to bring.

There is a fear among many clergy and Religious that empowerment of the laity will decline their power to rule them. Also, they are afraid that laypeople might rise against things that are not going well in many places, like what happened in Europe and America?

I guess this tendency is a legacy of Eurocentric Vatican bureaucracy as well.

But in his sermon during the installation Mass, Pope Francis emphasized the Church's role as the "protector of the poorest, weakest and vulnerable" and reminded people that "authentic power is service."

Does this signify real hope for the laity in the near future?

With each passing day, the pope's style, words and actions ignite hope and joy in 1.2 billion Catholics around the world.

We have seen some signs of hope, but real change and reform are yet to happen. Our leaders need to realize that authentic power comes from God and lies with people and empowering people they empower themselves.

If that happens during Pope Francis' time, the Church will become not only 'of and for the poor' but also 'for the poor' in the real sense.

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