Opinion
NCR Voices



Philippine Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle leads the recitation of the rosary for the repose of the soul of Pope Francis April 24, 2025, at Rome's Basilica of St. Mary Major, where the pope is to be buried April 26. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)



by Olivia Bardo

GSR Social/Multimedia Editor

View Author Profile
obardo@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Rome — April 29, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As we look ahead to the upcoming conclave, where cardinals will elect Pope Francis' successor, Gen Z is taking a particular interest in the ancient procedures of the Catholic Church.

No longer are the events of the conclave a buttoned-up ritual. In past conclaves, the wider world was relegated to an observational role, forced to sit and watch for white or black smoke. The conclave to elect a successor to Francis will be the first decidedly in the social media age, opening the flood gates of commentary — both insightful and comedic.

Gen Z, the first generation made entirely of digital natives, is adding their own unique take on the proceedings and reacting in their own language: memes.

Of particular interest to Gen Z is Filipino Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle. The internet has seemingly favored Tagle because of his approachability and progressive stance, qualities similar to Francis. In the past week, clips have been shared that endear an audience to Tagle, like this speech where he jokes about words he knows in Polish: kielbasa and vodka.

Advertisement

On TikTok and Instagram, young people are breaking down the papal candidates, adding their own views of the cardinals and putting their own stake in the game, so to speak. We're learning that by and large, Gen Z is looking for a figure who is relatable and doesn't take themselves too seriously, who isn't afraid of singing karaoke.

Although Tagle is the internet's favorite cardinal, Gen Z's vested interest in religion isn't tied to Tagle's chances at the papacy and didn't happen overnight.

Instead, their curiosity can be attributed to Francis, who spent his papacy gaining the trust of youth. Through Francis' legacy, which urges that there is space for everyone, Gen Z is bringing their own flavor to the centuries-old traditions of the Catholic Church, particularly in the conclave.

Take for example this meme, which says the Vatican will be filled with karaoke music once they accomplish the task of getting Tagle elected.

Gen Z has typically taken to memes to make sense of crises and current events. These memes serve a way of making Catholicism accessible. One could argue that this expression is Gen Z's way of stepping into religion, and breaking down centuries-old traditions into easier to understand pieces.

It is almost certain that Gen Z's memes won't influence the outcome of the conclave, but they are succeeding at adding some lightness and vivacity to the ancient wheels that turn.

This story appears in the **Who will be the next pope?** feature series. View the full series.