Vatican

Vatican News



The crowd at St. Peter's Square takes photos of the black smoke from the Sistine Chapel on May 7. (NCR photo/James V. Grimaldi)



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At age 73, Gary Toney joined the Catholic Church on Easter in Washington DC. For Eastertide, Toney and his wife, Laureen Toney, had planned to travel to Rome this week for the Jubilee.

So there they were, on Wednesday evening, May 7, the first day of the conclave to elect the successor to Pope Francis, standing in St. Peter's Square, waiting and watching for the smoke to emerge out of the tiny stick of a stovepipe that rises from the Sistine Chapel.

"Francis was my pope for less than two days," Gary Toney said. "I wish he'd stayed longer, because I kind of liked Pope Francis."

After a day of touring and visiting the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the Toneys, of Annapolis, Maryland, found their way amid 30,000 Italians, tourists, pilgrims and faithful, to see if the conclave would elect the successor to Francis on the first vote. The new Catholic was eager to see the new pope introduced to the world.

It was not to be.

As billows of black smoke rose from the chimney above the Sistine Chapel, a roar of shouts, whistles and applause rose from the square and thousands of people raised

their phones to take pictures.

With the field wide open, the Toneys were curious to see who might fill the throne of St. Peter. Married to a Catholic for 33 years, Gary Toney joined the church in his hometown of Washington, D.C. Married for 44 years, they met and live in Annapolis, but Gary and Laureen drive into Washington to attend St. Augustine Church, a historic parish founded in the District of Columbia in 1858 by emancipated Black Catholics.



Retirees Laureen and Gary Toney, of Annapolis, Maryland, react to expected black smoke. (NCR photo/James V. Grimaldi)

Laureen had explained to Gary that when the new pope is introduced on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, no one in the square will know who he is. The reveal is the draw for thousands in the square and millions worldwide. It will something they can

tell their two sons and five grandchildren.

"If it's a pope of color, I want to be here when he's introduced," Toney said.

Like the Toneys, a couple of friends from Phoenix were visiting Rome for the Jubilee. They waited in the square for three hours. "We knew it would be black smoke, but there was a very weird atmosphere in the air around 8:30. We didn't understand what was taking them so long," John McCormick said.

For one woman in the crowd, the wait only increased her interest. "We will definitely come tomorrow as early as 10 a.m. even though we are very tired," said Katrina Kovalska, a Polish computer science student visiting Rome.

An Italian father leaned against one of the barriers surrounding the front of St. Peter's Square and made a video call with his daughter, showing her the spectacle.

"Dad, can you imagine they're going to make the Japanese pope?" his daughter told him in an excited voice.

The father laughed and replied: "Can you imagine instead the pope will be Black?"

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Giovanni Tiburzio, a 42-year-old waiter from Rome, had just finished his shift at a restaurant in the Prati neighborhood just outside the Vatican, and went to St. Peter's Square to take in the spectacle. "These are things that happen only once in a lifetime," Tiburzio said.

A group of more than 10 Italian pilgrims on a trip from a small town in the province of Milan were sitting on a sidewalk on a side street of Via della Conciliazione. They were all college students between 20 and 35 years old. "We will stay until Sunday, and I'm sure tomorrow or Friday we will see the pope for the first time," Monica Vindolini, 24, said, with her eyes lit up.

As the minutes and hours ticked away, the Toneys were getting restless. Gary Toney, wearing a bicycle racing cap emblazoned with the D.C. flag, and Laureen Toney, wearing a floppy sun hat, leaned against a fence next to a tower for media from around the world.

"Come on, somebody give us some information," Gary Toney said. "Nobody knows anything. That's what's hip about this. No undisclosed sources to tell you about it."

When the black smoke flowed out of the chimney and everyone took their pictures, the Toneys were mulling whether to stick with their tour plans, or make a detour to the square.

"It's pretty grand," Laureen Toney said.

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