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Inspiration from the Coptic Christians' election of a new pope

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NCR Today

Egypt's Coptic Christians have a new pope. Bishop Tawadros will be ordained Nov. 18 as Pope Tawadros II. Following on the 40-year papacy of Pope Shenouda III, Pope Tawadros will become the leader of the largest Christian minority in the Middle East.

The news has made headlines around the world. Coptic Christians make up 10 percent of Egypt's population, and religious persecution is a concrete reality. What has spurred modern imaginations is the electoral process for the Coptic papacy, which began weeks ago. Approximately 2,400 clergymen and church notables finally agreed on a shortlist of three, all considered moderate candidates.

Their names were written on pieces of paper and put in crystal balls sealed with wax on the church altar. The final selection was made by a blindfolded child, who drew the name of the next patriarch from a crystal chalice. The moment of election was televised for all to see.

There is a beauty and simplicity in the belief that the hand of God will guide the final electoral step. What a leap of faith! What trust! The fact that the hand of an innocent child is used as an instrument for the Divine Will nudges the imagination.

Today, the heavens will be bombarded by prayers from Republicans and Democrats alike. And, yes, those of us who aren't Americans are sending prayers of our own. Sometimes we think prayers work like heavenly ballot boxes. The candidate -- or sports team, or awards nominee, or country at battle -- with the most prayers will emerge victorious. It often takes an awful leap of faith to trust that a loving God will ensure that all will be well even, and especially when, our own specific prayers aren't answered. This is the challenge for us all.

But the Coptic election does get the mind wondering. Presidential elections. Prime Ministerial elections. Episcopal and papal elections. Imagine the scenario if, after all the discerning and all the campaigning, the actual voting process was replaced with a simple lottery draw made by a blindfolded child in front of a praying and trusting community.

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