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Pope Francis' first papal appearance sparked joy, hope

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NCR Today
Pope Francis

No more chimney watching. We have a pope!

The chimney gained star status in this papal election. It was a quaint reminder of the traditions in our church. In the midst of instant social media, our eyes were glued to a smokestack. Chimney cams were fixed in corners of TV screens on news stations around the world. The appearance of a now-famous seagull provided some comic relief.

We are a church of symbols. As Catholics, we know the beauty and the power in words, signs, garments and gestures. For better or worse, we tend to categorize each other based on the language that is used, a preferred liturgical style, or habits and vestments that are worn.

When Pope Francis appeared on the papal balcony, signs and symbols abounded. He pushed aside the platform that would have raised him above others. He stood simply, without his arms raised in a victorious salute. There was no sense of "I won" or "look at me".

There was also an obvious lack of excessive papal finery -- just the plain, white cassock. He wore the ornate papal stole for the blessing, but took it off immediately after with a reverential kiss. The official photos of that first appearance will show a simple man, simply dressed, exuding humility in gesture and style.

The magic moment, of course, was when he asked for the blessing of the people before giving his own, papal blessing. I watched in awe. Was this really happening? Did he have this planned? What a brilliant gesture! Apparently, it is second nature to him. In this simple action, our new pope acknowledged that all God's people are called to raise their hands and hearts to the heavens to ask God to shower blessings and

graces on each other.

As the names of *papabili* continued to be bandied about, I became more and more discouraged. I dreaded the "*Habemus papam*" moment. I so wanted someone who could offer us hope and excitement. I realized, then, how much I wanted a true pastor, a man of the people. My eyes then turned to Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of the Philippines.

Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was not on my radar. When his name was announced, I had a Karol Wojtyla moment. Who? I soon found out that Bergoglio is a man with the same pastoral characteristics as the young Filipino cardinal, with the added benefit of age and experience. Cardinal Tagle's day may still come.

I'm looking forward to the papal inauguration Mass. We believe in *lex orandi, lex credendi*. The law of praying is the law of believing. Our words and actions speak loudly of our beliefs. I suspect our new pope will put aside the ostentatious, Baroque finery. I am eager to see what other visual and verbal statements will be made by Pope Francis, exterior statements of inner beliefs.

The Spirit is moving, and we rejoice!

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