

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 14, 2013 at 3:37pm

The unfailing hope of progressive Catholics

by Kate Childs Graham

Young Voices

Pope Francis

I just came back from lunch when a co-worker scurried to my cubicle.

"White smoke," she said. "There's white smoke."

My feet had a mind of their own as I ran to the nearest television, absolutely transfixed. I remained glued to the news coverage, with the Latin names of who I thought were likely choices on a Post-it note in front of me (Georgium wasn't on the list). My pulse was racing. My stomach was in knots.

When Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran steadied his voice to announce "*Habemus papam*," I only caught the name Francisco, and scurried to Twitter to fill in the rest.

The snippets of the new pope's bio were promising.

From Argentina? Amazing. A Jesuit? Yes! Chose the name Francis? Now we're talking.

And then like a flood came the other news. Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio -- now Pope Francis -- once described same-sex marriage as a "destructive attack on God's plan." He also said gay adoption is a form of discrimination against children.

I held a picture of my son -- adopted by my partner just two short years ago -- and suddenly, my hopes were dashed.

Going into the conclave, there was little doubt the cardinals would elect a pope who toed the hierarchy line against LGBT equality. So, why? Why did I have any hope this new pope would be supportive of my

family in the first place?

A non-Catholic friend put the question another way on Facebook: "What did you expect?" she wrote.

As I scrolled through my Facebook feed and email reactions came flooding in from fellow progressive Catholics, I noticed I wasn't alone in my (perhaps foolhardy) hope. Other LGBT Catholics, progressive activists, and warriors for women's leadership in the church were looking for the good in this new leader.

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One wrote: "I'm undecided on this guy. I'm very interested in learning more about him. I like that he's a Jesuit though."

Another said, after laundry-listing his views on everything from abortion to war: "Of the choices, I'm willing to give him a shot."

A third remarked: "I see things that make me hopeful and things that make me wary."

For decades, centuries probably, progressive Catholics have been doing the work of being the church we want to see. We build small faith communities. We lift up women leaders. We welcome married priests. We bless same-sex unions. We baptize children of same-sex parents. We shelter those who are victims of the sex abuse scandal. We talk openly about sexual and reproductive health. We speak out for the rights of workers. We stand with the poor. We ride buses with nuns. We cherish democracy. We strive for transparency. We follow our consciences.

And we've done this all regardless of who sits in the chair of St. Peter. Yet who sits in that chair still seems to matter to me and others who share my views.

As committed as we are to creating change in the church from the ground up, we can't help but hold out hope this change will be reflected by the leaders of the hierarchy. We can't help but treat moments like Wednesday's as fresh starts, as new beginnings.

Or, as a friend wrote,: "This is the beginning of the beginning of a new time for our church. I can't possibly know what that will look like, but that's what we're in. The beginning of the beginning."

The voice of reason in my head tells me she's wrong. We've endured too much of the same oppression, the same regression for far too long for *this* to be a new beginning.

But in my heart of hearts, in my faith of faiths, I can't help but hope that she is right.

[Kate Childs Graham is an activist in the progressive Catholic movement. A graduate of The Catholic University of America and the U.N.-mandated University for Peace in Costa Rica, she currently serves as speechwriter for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).]

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