My Church, My Home: The Hope of the Election of Pope Leo XIV

-Kayla August

If I’m honest, it’s not always easy to be Catholic, particularly from a minority group. Being Black and Catholic puts you in the minority group in both the Catholic AND Black communities, as I work to explain to those inside and outside of my community the beauty of the unique intersection of the African American Roman Catholic experience. If that weren’t enough, being a faith-filled young adult in a primarily “spiritual but not religious” modern context requires its moments of explanation. Let’s all be honest, the church is often not doing me any favors as I work to defend it. People wonder why I can be part of an institution that preaches love, yet many marginalized people fail to experience it when they need it most.

So, why do I stay? Because I’ve felt undeniable moments of God's presence in this Catholic community. On a personal level, as my heart was touched by a hymn in mass or by a preaching moment on retreat, but also on a broader level, when I’ve watched the entire church stir unexpectedly with the Spirit at work.

This Thursday was one of those moments. This week, I traveled to the Chicago Theological Union for a Conference on Reconciliation practices in the church. As a young theological doctoral student, I got lost in intensely preparing for my presentation, but I landed in Chicago as the white smoke erupted from the Vatican. The global church was stirring, and I was glued to the live stream of my phone, waiting to see what God had done. Friends, from outside and inside the church, were tuning in. They reached out via text with questions and excitement of their own.

I sat in the Lyft on the way to the hotel, and the young black man driving was curious, to say the least. “We're waiting for the pope!?” I told him with excitement. “You must be Catholic.” He said, “I don’t know much about the Catholic church.”

“Well, this is a BIG moment for us, and you’re a part of it with me!”

As the car moved down the highway, I excitedly followed the stream as it panned to people across the square in Vatican City, all with different flags from different countries. Proudly waving and waiting. I knew moments like this were best spent in the Catholic community, so I arrived at CTU with faculty, staff, and Augustians gathering in one room. When I arrived at CTU, the excitement was palpable.

Then, he emerged—our new American-born pope. He was a Chicago native and a graduate of CTU- needless to say, the room was ecstatic. And, I had joy in my heart that was bursting. The Uber driver saw it. The room felt it. The group chats exploding in my phone erupted in equal measure. “Look what God has done!” A Chicago native, who lived in Peru, with ancestry from New Orleans- my home sweet home.

Our new pope’s eyes welled with water as he spoke to the crowd (both present and tuning in across the globe). He was fully aware of the enormity of the task he was elected to fulfill, but with a humble heart, he stepped forward.

Sometimes, the church can feel irrelevant - not in my life, but in the lives of friends who refuse to tune in. On Thursday, the WORLD was watching, and we were all equally surprised at the outcome.

I choose to remain in the Church because the Spirit always surprises us. Human institutions can and will fail us, but with God at work… the spirit always rises in unexpected ways. To remind us, God is leading the way. As a theologian and preacher, I purposely place myself in spaces where the disaffiliated gather. Pope Francis once said, It’s essential to 'smell like the sheep.” I don’t know what sheep smell like, but I know the smell of a bar at the comedy club where I perform or the baked goods I made to share with the students in my dorm. Each moment is one where I reach those who may never walk into the church doors, but I remind them that God is at work and the Spirit is moving in each of us.

On Thursday, and the weeks prior, I was surprised by the used-to-be or I would-NEVER-be Catholics in my life who reached out feeling sadness about the loss of Francis, or interest in the new possible pope. They were tuning in for something bigger than all of us. Even if they couldn’t name what it was, I could. It was God’s spirit at work in the imperfect, powerful, and global institution. This Church spans continents, languages, traditions, races, and more. The Spirit moves in them all. Thursday was a reminder. If you are a South Side of Chicago, white sox fan can become the holy father. I am reminded that God can work through each of us and will continue to surprise us, as long as we let him.