

Local Latinos find hope in first South American pope

By Maria Wiering

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Sarah Rodriguez moved from Buenos Aires, Argentina, to the United States in 1953, but has followed the work of a certain cardinal in her home diocese.

"The joy is inexplicable to know that somebody from your own country is elected pope," she said March 13 through a translator, hours after Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires was elected pope.

Rodriguez, 80, was among 70 Catholics who attended a Spanish-language Mass at St. Patrick in Fells Point that evening. The Mass is a weekly event, but the atmosphere was heightened by news of the first Latin American pope. Rodriguez never expected it to that happen in her lifetime, she said.

During the Mass, Father Orlando Gonzalez said Cardinal Bergoglio's selection was a source of hope for the church, and reflected on the significance of him choosing the name Francis to honor St. Francis of Assisi, the 12th-century friar and founder of the Franciscan order.

St. Patrick is a mission of Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in Highlandtown, home to a large Spanish-speaking community. Redemptorist Father Robert Wojtek, the parish's pastor, said he was "blown away" by the election of Pope Francis.

"It's just so historic - not only that he's a religious, a Jesuit - but the name he chose, Francis, you could see it. It's so consistent with everything they say about him," he said, referring to reports that as cardinal, Pope Francis used public transportation, kept his own house, cooked his own meals and cared for the city's sick and poor.

The election of an Argentinian pope is a proud moment for Latin Americans, including those who have immigrated to the United States, Father Wojtek said. Thirty-nine percent of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics live in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

"He's probably what we need at this point," he said. "This is a great thing, to have a spokesperson for these people - to recognize and to lift them up. It's inspiring and a real shot in the arm."

Jaisdel Ferino, a 27-year-old Mexican immigrant, said a Latin American pope makes the papacy "feel familiar."

"It makes me feel like having more faith," he said, adding that he hoped Pope Francis' election unifies Latin American Catholics.

El Salvador-born Lourdes Benites expressed a similar affection for Pope Francis.

"I'm very happy," she said.

Colombian-born Fernando and Maryam Gaviria said they hoped the pope could be a force for change, both in Latin America and the Catholic Church.

"This pope has a different experience than other popes," said Fernando Gaviria, 62.

Maryam Gaviria, 61, said the church needs to encourage young adults to embrace their Catholic faith and become leaders, including priests and religious.

Like Catholics in her parish and worldwide, Rodriguez said she is praying for the new pontiff, as he requested during his first appearance as pope.

"(We are) expecting he will do the best he can in this moment, when the holy church needs so much to be raised up," she said. "He will do it with the help of the prayer of the whole people."

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