

# World is experiencing pope as they did 'Father Jorge'

written by Dwain Hebda |



On March 13, as white smoke billowed out from the Sistine Chapel chimney, emotions ran high among employees of the heavily Hispanic parish of St. Anne Church in North Little Rock.

Finally, the announcement of Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio to the world was too much for at least one staffer to take.

"I was crying, I was crying," said Graciela Bruzatori, parish accountant and native of Argentina, still shaking her head as if to clear the last cobwebs of amazement.

Meanwhile Guillermo Bruzatori, her husband of 32 years and the parish's Hispanic ministry director, knew the phone call he had to make. He dutifully dialed his mother in Buenos Aires.

"She was not so excited," Guillermo said. "When I asked her why not, she said, 'I worked with the man for so many years, I am not surprised.'"

"And besides," Betty Bruzatori reminded her son, "I told you!"

Guillermo, 58, tells the story and shrugs; he should've known better. Betty made the prediction almost 40 years ago when Guillermo was a college student and she the head of the social studies department at Universidad del Salvador, a Jesuit university in Buenos Aires. There, she worked closely with then-Father Bergoglio, the Jesuit provincial and school president.

"Mom told me, 'He's going to become pope one day.' I said, 'Mom, why would they elect a pope from Argentina?'" Guillermo remembers. "In 2001, he became a cardinal she said, 'I told you. He's getting close.' I said, 'Mom, that's OK.'"

"Some people were expecting him to be pope in 2005, but there's a saying if you come into the

conclave as pope you leave as a cardinal and that's what happened."

The Bruzatoris share personal encounters with Pope Francis in the same manner one might about a fellow parishioner suddenly elected president. They don't claim to be friends or confidantes of the new pontiff — they are adamant on this point — but experiencing his ministry firsthand before immigrating to the United States in 2002 has given them unique perspective.

Of his now-famous penchant for simplicity, Guillermo remembers, "Once, he came to my brother's house to baptize my nephew; he was archbishop, but not yet a cardinal. I remember we called to see if we could come pick him up and he said, no, he would just take the bus."

Or of the simple, direct tone that so often comforted the marginalized but just as easily decimated those with the power to help but failed to do so.

"The two big festivals in Argentina are for the revolution and for independence day and the president always goes to Mass," Guillermo said. "Ten years ago, the president (the late Nestor Kirchner) is sitting in the first row and Bergoglio gives the homily and he is talking about him. Well, they don't like it and so the next year they go to Mass at a different parish and they never came back.

"For him, whether someone is right or left doesn't exist, he says what he truly feels. He has always been like that, and it caused him a lot of trouble with the government. But we love that about him."

Of everything that has captivated the world's Catholics, perhaps nothing's more powerful than Archbishop Bergoglio kissing the feet of AIDS patients and drug addicts in neighborhoods even Argentine locals avoid.

"We call them villas miserias, misery villages," Graciela said. "These villas are right there in Buenos Aires. That's where really poor people are. These are who he really cares about and that makes me happy because there are so many in need."

Graciela said she expects the new pope to continue his work on behalf of the disenfranchised, on a global scale. She said his courage and administrative skills can bring needed changes and unity to the Church and he should set about it soon.

"The things that need to be straightened out, he needs to get them straight and do not wait," she said. "Do it now while you have the energy."

Their countryman's election inspires and energizes their own ministry, the evangelization retreats they help conduct that has brought new life to their once-struggling parish. Their three children, now young adults, join them in this work, something that promotes family unity.

In May, after an absence of several years, Graciela and Guillermo will travel to Argentina to visit and conversation will assuredly include recollections of Pope Francis in the days when he just another priest trying to shine God's light into the darkest of places. In many ways, Guillermo said, he suspects he still is.

"In Argentina, when we meet someone we know a little, we don't say, 'Oh hello, sir.' So, the first time I met Bergoglio, I was young and I knew who he was so I said, 'Hey, Jorge!'" he said.

"I would be better today, but if I met him I would probably say, 'Hello, Father.' I don't think he would like being called 'Your Holiness.' That's not him."