During the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Georgetown University was joining the nation's college basketball elite, its coach, John Thompson, had a rule.

Freshmen players were not allowed to be interviewed by the media.

Sports reporters bristled at Thompson's gag order on freshmen at my alma mater, particularly after he landed Patrick Ewing, a highly prized recruit who ended up leading the Hoyas to three national championship games.

Thompson felt that freshmen needed time to adjust to college and the exposure that playing on a big stage would bring. He wanted them to learn from the upperclassmen how to handle themselves when a tape recorder or microphone was thrust in front of their mouth. It seems like a quaint idea now, with 18-year-old phenoms going straight to the NBA and even some high school programs getting face time on ESPN.

But Thompson wouldn't budge. When pressed whether he was being fair to his younger players by shielding them and thus hindering their national exposure, he said, "I'm not running a democracy here."

That memory struck me last week after our veterinarian began quizzing me about the election of the new pope.

The vet is a Methodist who, after marrying a Baptist, is now attending a Baptist church. He was curious about the papal selection process, questioning why 115 cardinals got to decide in secret who among them would be the next spiritual leader of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics.

"Why don't all of you get a vote?" asked the vet, knowing that I am a Catholic.

"Because the Catholic Church is not a democracy," I told him.

The election of a pope is not the only thing about the Catholic Church that throws non-Catholics for a loop here. At times in the past, our theological differences with Protestantism and our relatively small numbers in all of Mississippi except the Gulf Coast have caused Catholics to be maligned in this state. These days, anti-Catholicism has largely disappeared, or at least it seems to me it has. But there is still a lot we do that non-Catholics find strange.

We are fond of rules, for one thing. No meat on Friday during Lent. No eating anything an hour before communion. Attendance at Mass on Sunday (or Saturday evening) is obligatory.

We are restless worshippers. We stand, we sit, we kneel — all according to verbal or visual cues from the priest or other ministers that seem like a secret code to the uninitiated.

We are high on authority. If you don't particularly care for the priest who has been assigned to your parish, tough. The congregation doesn't get to hire him, and it doesn't get to fire him.

As far as the new pope, I like what I have seen so far.

The former archbishop of Buenos Aires appears to be a humble, godly man with a special connection to the poor. His history is one of being uncomfortable with the trappings of privilege,

prefering more to follow the model of Jesus Christ as a servant rather than one being served.
It was time for the Catholic Church to break out from its European domination of the papacy. The selection of the first Latin American as pope firmly acknowledges that the population center of Catholicism has moved far away from Rome.
The former cardinal of Buenos Aires demonstrated, though, a respectful sensitivity to the transition. He picked Francis, also a first, as his papal name, in honor of the patron saint of Italy, St. Francis of Assisi. It also didn't hurt that the Argentine is the son of Italian immigrants and is fluent in Italian.
I'm also partial to Jesuits. Francis is the first from that religious order to become a pope. The Jesuits are big on social justice and on education. They run more than 100 colleges around the world, including Georgetown. They also operate more than 50 high schools in the United States alone, one from which I also graduated.
The American press has focused on the troubles that Francis has inherited, from financial scandals at the Vatican to the continued fallout over the sexual abuse of minors by a small percentage of priests.
One of his biggest challenges, though, is the declining number of priests in the developed world. There is a reason most of those cardinals look so old. For decades now, the pipeline of new priests has been shrinking in places where wealth has been rising. Mississippi feels the shortage as acutely as any. The two Franciscan priests in Greenwood are spread thin, caring for two churches and an elementary school here, a church in Lexington and another one in Winona.
I might have preferred a younger pope. At 76 and despite being in apparent good health, Francis does not seem ideally suited to inspiring young men and women to enter the religious life.
As Catholics, though, we are asked to trust that the right choice was made. Although the cardinals cast the votes at the conclave, we believe it was the Holy Spirit who actually did the choosing.