

## Locals among pilgrims at Pope's Washington visit

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**Washington, DC** - Amid tight security, thousands converged on the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC to get a glimpse of Pope Francis. The head of the world's Roman Catholic Church arrived in the Nation's Capital Tuesday, Sept. 22. After a ceremony at the White House Wednesday morning, Sept. 23, followed by a service with U.S. Bishops at St. Matthew's Cathedral, Francis was driven—via Pope Mobile—to the campus of Catholic University (CU) where many people had been waiting as long as eight hours.

Local schools invited to send groups of students to Washington, DC for Pope Francis' visit included St. Mary's Ryken (SMR) High School, St. John's School of Hollywood and Mother Catherine Academy (MCA).

According to MCA Principal Linda M. Miedzinski, students attended a "meet and greet" with the Pope at the Vatican Embassy. "Our motto is 'we see Christ in the eyes of poor, MCA walks with Francis.' "

Miedzinski said MCA seventh-grader Reagan Sutton "showed excitement when the Pope reached out and placed his hand on her shoulder." Sutton told Miedzinski she "had to call her mother to share in the excitement."

Eighteen SMR students comprised that school's delegation to Washington to welcome and meet Pope Francis. According to SMR spokeswoman Betsy Haley 11 students "had a chance to shake his hand and meet him."

"This is an experience our MCA children will remember throughout their lives," said Miedzinski.

The gathering at the National Shrine came from many different locations in the Metropolitan Region, including Southern Maryland. Every church in the Washington, DC Archdiocese was allocated a number of tickets for the historic Canonization Mass of Blessed Junipero Serra. It was the first canonization mass on American soil.

"It's very exciting," said Alex Boucher, a seminarian from Boston who graduated from CU. "It's a great experience for seminarians. Hopefully, he has words to say to us." Boucher and several other seminarians were in the Shrine's upper church when Pope Francis entered the basilica prior to the start of the 4 p.m. mass.

"It makes you realize it [CU] is quite a special place," said Billy Henry, a junior at the university. Henry, who also hails from New England, said Pope Francis' visit to the U.S. has created excitement in his home town. "My mother was able to come down to attend mass," he said.

According to Sister Luce, whose community of nuns from Mexico is located on the university's campus, there was excitement throughout the convent regarding the pope's visit. "We are very excited to see the Holy Father," she said. Recalling Pope John Paul II's visit to the National Shrine during the late 1970s, Sister Luce said she had managed to get very close to the Pontiff. She was praying for a similar interaction with Francis on this occasion.

"I saw Pope Benedict in 2008 at Nationals Stadium," said CU student Luke Cummings. "The reason I got here so early is to get the best seat. I go to 7:30 a.m. mass every day at the Shrine. For Pope Francis to be here at this church is simply amazing."

"This is my second time seeing the Pope," said Jerry Godinez, 19 of Hyattsville. "I saw the Pope previously in 2008. Pope Benedict was a blast to see. But I am really looking forward to seeing 'the People's Pope.' "

"I'm a Catholic school teacher," said Beth Campbell of Takoma Park. "My faith is very important." Campbell, a second-grade teacher at Mother of God School in Gaithersburg, said one of her students was at the Shrine for the Wednesday mass and 10 others would be greeted at the Papal Nuncio Thursday.

Campbell indicated her students have been anticipating Francis' visit to Washington. "We've been doing all sorts of projects," she said, adding that the students have made a Pope Puppet and have taken the pledge to "Walk with Francis."

Ana Rosas of Rockville, who converted to Catholicism five years ago when she was in graduate school declared, "it's definitely a 'God thing' that I'm here. I'm very grateful to be here."

"I feel like it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," said Brenda Delgado, a social worker who lives in Silver Spring. Delgado, who is a member of 270 Catholic, a ministry of young adults in the I-270 Montgomery County region, said Pope Francis message "is for everybody." She added that the Pontiff's down-to-earth demeanor has raised the intensity level for Catholics in the area's Latino community. "Being humble is huge," she said.

In the hours prior to the Pope's arrival at the campus, attendees meandered around the university, some shopping at the makeshift markets selling event merchandise; or purchasing food—mostly sandwiches, chips and fruit. Many in the standing room areas spread on the ground the plastic papal ponchos that were in their goody bags, using the item as if it were a beach blanket. Several of the pilgrims took naps.

When at long-last the Pope arrived, cell phones and cameras were raised in the air and blessed by the Pontiff as he rode past them.

"It was wonderful," declared "Lady" Patricia Butler, a Washington, DC resident who explained she has ties to the Charles County area. "I love this Pope." As for her city returning to normal after Francis leaves for his next stop on his U.S. tour, Butler thought a second and said, "I hope it doesn't return to normal."

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