

## Counselor's Corner

### "Reflections on a Journey to the Papal Mass in Philadelphia"

Friday, September 25, my son and I drove 8.5 hours to Millersville, Pennsylvania, a stop to rest and visit before we continued to Philadelphia on Sunday. Along the way, tour busses parked at rest stops, and emptied out passengers of all ages and backgrounds, wearing chains or ribbons with Papal tour tags around their necks. Several religious sisters emerged wearing a variety of colors, including some hues I had never seen. Some had tickets to the Papal mass or the speech the day before, but many came only with the hope of getting a glimpse at the holy man known as "the people's pope". Unlike the usual, sleepy, lackadaisical travelers who inhabit the plazas, these people were giddy with excitement, and they prayed before they partook of their Kentucky Fried chicken or fast food burgers. They were eager to talk, and we all realized we were part of a club on a special mission, a pilgrimage.

At 6AM on Sunday, we drove to Lancaster where we caught the 7AM train, guarding our coveted tickets to the 4PM mass in Philadelphia. We felt a comradeship with the passengers who were guided by their dreams and their faith. Some made rosaries while others chatted on with anticipation. Others read the bible or quoted the psalms. It was unusual but special train ride!

We had lots of time to tour Philadelphia's major landmarks (Independence Hall, Ben Franklin Museum, and the Liberty Bell), and to search for the best Philly steak sandwich. At a time when some people seem to take the separation of church and state to the extreme, it was overwhelming to hear tour guides reference the pope's speech the day before while they talked about principles of democracy. It was awesome to witness the power of the pope. Five square miles of the city were totally blocked off, and most area stores and restaurants were closed. Air space was for military helicopters only. Local, state, and federal police, along with police from other states, worked closely with the National Guard troops and their Humvees to secure the area. It was incredible walking through a major city with no traffic.

Our feet were our only means of transportation. Backed by a belief in something greater than ourselves, knees, hips, and feet were able to work together to enable us to walk about 8 miles. The only vehicles in site belonged to the police or military with the exception of police-escorted busses with VIPs aboard. As time marched on, the crowds formed, got bigger, and an anticipatory buzz was all around. Hawkers had flags, buttons, pictures, and people eagerly swooped on items that would commemorate this special day. People began to sing, beat on drums, and incredible shouts arose when the pope was in site.

We were not in the select seating for the mass, but we had a decent view of the altar and the pope between two tall, wide stands for the press. It was odd to be standing in a crowd of 800,000, knowing that about 550,000 of those were dependent on the Jumbo video screens. However, we all heard the musicians and the choir, and we sang along to hymns that unified us. After Pope Francis's stirring homily and the consecration, hundreds of yellow objects appeared, looking a little like floating, Chinese lanterns. As they got closer, we realized they were yellow, nylon umbrellas, held by the people accompanying the priests that distributed communion to the crowd. Their primary purpose was to alert people to the Communion stations. At the end of the mass, we were all blessed by Pope Francis, and he asked us to pray for him. That really struck a chord with me.

On this trip, I met many people who were devout Catholics as well as others who were baptized but did not follow the faith. There were representatives from various ethnic and religious groups (Christian and non-Christian) all over Philadelphia, as well in the other places where the pope had stopped. On the pope's tour, he visited diverse groups, religious, political, abused, incarcerated. All present seemed to admire and respect this pope and his welcoming plea to be "open to the miracle of love". I believe Pope Francis is not only the people's pope, but he is the pope of many peoples. May we all follow his example in our actions and deeds.

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