



At Mass, surprised family learns of meeting with pope

By Lou Baldwin

When Pope Francis arrived in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 22, President Barack Obama officially welcomed him. Four days later when his plane landed in Philadelphia, Rick and Bernadette Bowes and their children — Matthew, Riley and Gabrielle of St. Christopher Parish in the Somerton section of the city — were right there to officially greet him.

The formal announcement that the family had been chosen to greet Pope Francis was made at St. Christopher's by Donna Crilley Farrell, executive director for the World Meeting of Families on Sunday, Sept. 13, at the conclusion of the 10:30 a.m. Mass. The instant applause of parishioners was clearly from the heart.

That is how it should be. The primary reason Pope Francis came to America was for the closing events of the World Meeting of Families including the celebration of Mass on Philadelphia's Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Rick and Bernadette and their children typify a solid Catholic family.

Seven years ago Rick, who was a Philadelphia Police Officer with the Highway Patrol, was seriously wounded by a felon who had just killed another officer. It is only recently that he was sufficiently healed to take a new position with the Pennsylvania State Attorney General's office.

It is not, however, because of heroics in the line of duty that Rick and his family were chosen.

"They are an exceptional Catholic family, active in the parish and the community," said St. Christopher's pastor, Msgr. Joseph Garvin, who nominated them for the honor. "We do have many exceptional families in the parish, but they are the ideal Christian family."

Their faith goes way back. Rick is a graduate of Ascension of Our Lord School and Northeast Catholic High, both now closed, while Bernadette graduated from St. Martha School and Archbishop Ryan High. The kids are in seventh, sixth and third grades at St. Christopher.

Msgr. Gavin recalls that after Rick's literal brush with death, the parish sent a check to assist with the bills for his lengthy recovery. Bernadette sent it back to Msgr. Garvin with the family's gratitude and thanks, saying there must be people in the parish who needed it more than they did.

For the announcement of the Bowes family's selection to greet the pope, Rick had been given a heads up by Msgr. Garvin just to make certain they would all attend that particular Mass. Bernadette, who



Bernadette Bowes (center) was shocked when it was announced at the end of Mass that her family would greet the Pope upon his arrival in Philadelphia Sept. 26. Her children, from left, include Matthew, Riley and Gabrielle. (Sarah Webb)

thought maybe the family was going to be asked to bring up the offertory gifts, burst into tears at the announcement. She really was in need of a bit of happy news because she had just buried her mother, Joan McLaughlin. It was expected but still a major sorrow.

Speaking after the Sept. 13 Mass, Rick still couldn't quite get his head around his family getting to greet Pope Francis.

"For my part I think he is going to be a saint in the future and we are meeting him," Rick said. "He is so forward thinking, bringing the Church up to modern times."

Family is all-important to Rick and Bernadette.

"We lean on each other and we come together as a unit," Rick said. "We always try to pull each other up and the best person we can be. That's what we try to teach to our children. Even in our darkest times faith was there for us; we prayed when things didn't look good."

Rick's recovery took five years and included seven surgeries and three hospital stays and he was not really able to do much to help Bernadette with their three young children.

Now he looks on the bright side. His police work was mostly on the 6 p.m.-2 a.m. shift with lots of weekend work. Now he works nine to five, no weekends.

"To me everything happens for a reason," he said. "Now I'm home every day for the kids. I have a normal life."

Bernadette prayed throughout Rick's long recovery. When she dropped the kids off at school she would stop in at the church. Her prayer was not so much supplication as thanksgiving for the miracle her husband was still alive.

"I look back and am in awe that we got through," she said. "I really believe that God gave me the strength to do what I had to do. Your religion is the basis for your morality and your values. That is what is taught at St. Christopher's. That is what I want my kids to learn and grow up with."

Bernadette and Rick think there are many others more deserving of the honor to greet Pope Francis, and it is humbling.

Their kids of course are excited. Speaking for the three, Gabrielle, the youngest, said, "I'm so happy I couldn't believe it."

As for her message to Pope Francis, it is one universally shared in the Philadelphia Archdiocese: "Welcome to Philadelphia. I hope you enjoy it."

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Pilgrims stopped at Neumann U en route to papal events

As travelers descended upon Philadelphia from around the globe for the World Meeting of Families and the papal visit, Neumann University was doing its part.

The university, which emphasizes Franciscan hospitality, welcomed over 170 pilgrims traveling on foot and by bus to its Aston, Delaware County, campus for the festivities.

"We're delighted that we can accommodate (the pilgrims) here with our facilities and any resources that we have here to help them on this pilgrimage," said Franciscan Sister Marguerite O'Beirne, vice president at Neumann University. Likening the itinerant preaching style of St. Francis traveling in medieval Europe to the visit of Pope Francis to America, "pilgrimage is a wonderful way of celebrating the papal visit here," said Sister Marguerite.

Among the four groups that rolled onto Neumann's campus were two from fellow Franciscan universities, each 50 pilgrims strong.

They included the University of St. Francis in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, and Alvernia University in Reading, Pa. Those pilgrims joined Neumann's own company Sunday morning, Sept. 27, to catch a train to the Mass together.

Two diocesan groups also stayed at Neumann during their journey to Philadelphia. Fifty individuals and families representing a cross-section of the church from Davenport, Iowa, joined a group of 20 pilgrims walking the roughly 100 miles from Baltimore to Philadelphia.

Neumann's team worked hard on the complex logistics to ensure that their guests were safe and comfortable during their stay by arranging sleeping accommodations, planning festivities with sensitivity to the needs of the road-weary, making arrangements for toiletries, and yes, setting up schedules for the showers.

"I believe that (hospitality) is certainly a Franciscan attribute," said Sister Marguerite. "We hear of 'Franciscan hospitality,' but I think it's also part of the Catholic tradition."

Parish hosts monthly Mass for persons with disabilities

The Gospel text couldn't have been more appropriate, although totally unplanned. It was the Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Mark 7:31-37, in which Jesus heals the man who was deaf and mute.

At St. John Chrysostom Church in Wallingford it was the first Sunday of the month, when the parish celebrates its monthly Mass of Welcoming and Inclusion to which children and adults with disabilities and their families are especially invited.

Sept. 6 happened to be the second such Mass and the first to invite members of the

deaf community.

"Our community this morning is complete because you are here," said St. John's pastor, Father Edward Hallinan, in his homily. "I apologize to the deaf community because we have not acted sooner. Everyone is welcome. Everyone is cherished."

Because it was one of St. John's regularly scheduled Masses, the congregation was composed of people without discernable disabilities as well as others with visual impairment, hearing impairment, physical impairment and cognitive impairment, worshipping together as children of God.

The Mass was signed in American Sign Language, thanks to a young volunteer, Sarah Cardie, who is studying for her degree in sign interpretation.

Father Hallinan recalled meeting parents who were not coming to church because their child's disability was such that they might be disruptive during the liturgy. "They needed a Mass just for them," he said. "This was listening to parents of children with disabilities and reaching out to them."

The program at St. John's is headed by parishioner Kristina Vacha, who estimated there were about 100 persons with disabilities or hearing impairment and family members at the Mass along with several hundred other congregants.

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