

For Catholic youth from R.I., waiting for Pope was worth every hour

BY LAUREN CLEM, STAFF REPORTER

10/8/15

PHILADELPHIA — When Pope Francis travelled to Philadelphia for the World Meeting of Families, his many speeches included an appeal to youth to remain invested in the mission and outreach of the Church community.

“How many young people in our parishes and schools have the same high ideals, generosity of spirit and love for Christ and the Church?” he asked an audience of clergy and religious during a homily delivered at the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Philadelphia. “Do we challenge them? Do we make space for them and help them to do their part?”

For Catholic youth from Rhode Island’s colleges and

universities, doing their part meant embarking on a six-hour bus trip to Philadelphia to catch a glimpse of the Holy Father during his inaugural trip to the U.S. Providence College, Brown University, Rhode Island School of Design and Salve Regina University were all represented in Philadelphia as the schools’ campus ministry offices arranged pilgrimages for interested students to attend the once-in-a-lifetime event.

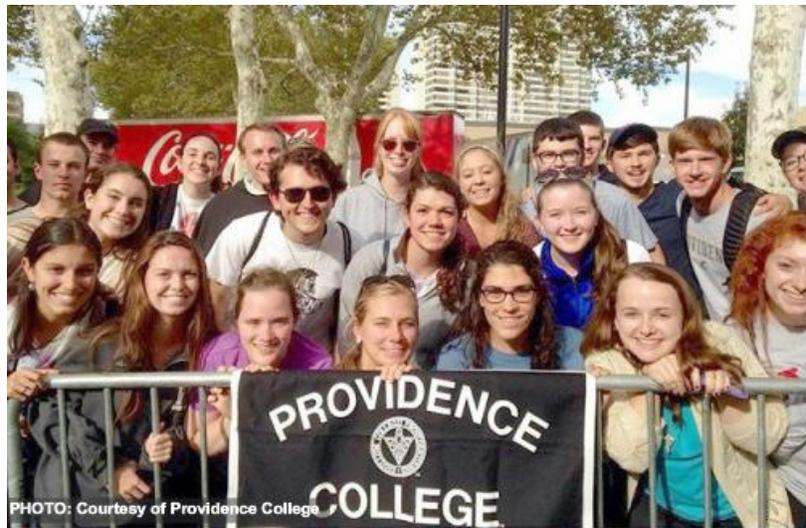


PHOTO: Courtesy of Providence College

“When we heard that the pope was coming last year, we thought, “That would be great!”” said Meghan Lescault, a Providence College student who travelled with 54 other students, faculty and staff to Philadelphia for Pope Francis’s visit. “It was especially exciting to go with Providence College because this is a place where my faith has really come alive for me.”

The students, accompanied by three priests and a religious sister, traveled on a bus to Philadelphia, where they stayed at the National Museum of American Jewish History. Like many venues in the area, the museum opened its doors to pilgrims in need of a place to sleep, clearing its floors of the usual historical artifacts to make room for a little bit of living history.

Dee Auciello, a Providence College sophomore, said that even though she has been to several youth conferences with 2,000 or more people in attendance, this trip was unlike anything she's experienced in the past. On Saturday, Sept. 26, students witnessed the pope's speech at Independence Hall and watched him parade down the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in preparation for the Festival of Families; on Sunday, they participated in a papal Mass with an estimated 1 million people in attendance.

"My favorite part was just standing there during the papal Mass and looking around at the crowds of people singing and praying," she said. "I was crying for the entire Mass. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

A Global studies major, Auciello said the international flags decorating the Benjamin Franklin Parkway helped reinforce the idea of the Church as a world community under the pope's leadership. "Waiting for the Festival of Families to begin, you looked around and saw how many different people were there," she said. "All of the orders of priests, all the people from around the world – we really are like a human family united under Christ."

Providence College faculty and students are no strangers to Pope Francis. In 2013, junior Joseph Day, now studying for the Dominican priesthood as Brother Damian, participated in a Vatican tradition by offering a white zucchetto to Pope Francis, who blessed the skullcap before returning it. Earlier that year, 8-year-old Dominic Gondreau, son of Providence College professor Dr. Paul Gondreau and his wife Christiana, received a blessing from the pontiff during Easter Sunday Mass. The blessing, which took place only two weeks after Pope Francis's election, was an early example of his particular concern for those with disabilities, a trait for which he would later become known.

"It was iconic because it was the first. It really helped to define Pope Francis," said Dr. Gondreau, who said that watching the pope embrace other disabled children during his U.S. trip allowed his family to relive the special moment. A professor of theology, Dr. Gondreau pointed out that Pope Francis's papacy has become known for its emphasis on pastoral care.

"Pope Francis is a pastor. He spent more time blessing people and visiting with people than giving speeches," said Dr. Gondreau. "What's distinctive about him? He goes to the margins."

Father Peter Martyr Yungwirth, O.P., assistant chaplain at Providence College, said the pilgrimage presented an opportunity for students to engage with Pope Francis, including those for whom seeing a pope was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

"There's been a lot of excitement," he said. "For a lot of them, this is the first time that they've ever seen a pope. The reality of the papacy is that this is the successor of Peter, the Vicar of Christ and the chief shepherd of the Church."

“Usually for our events it’s always the same people, but the event with the pope had a wider appeal” added Lescault, who serves as a student administrator for faith formation. “We got a lot of people we didn’t expect and a lot of freshmen. It was nice to have this as one of their first events.”

Sharing in the excitement were students from Brown University and Rhode Island School of Design, who traveled on a pilgrimage organized by the Brown-RISD Catholic Community. The 11 students left Rhode Island for Philadelphia early Saturday morning, participating in both days of papal events and sleeping in the basement of Saints Agatha and James Church. Amelia Khoo, a Brown University sophomore, recalled the sense of solidarity among the pilgrims even as they waited in long security lines for admission to the papal Mass.

“The community there was so inspiring. It was amazing to see so many people – especially young people – who had traveled such distances to be there,” she said. “And the experience itself was incredible. We actually got to see the pope, which was amazing.”

Salve Regina University students experienced a special kind of solidarity, accepting an invitation from Gwynedd University, located about 20 miles north of Philadelphia, to join students from other Sisters of Mercy institutions for the papal events. The students spent Saturday in a discussion of social concerns critical to the mission of the Sisters of Mercy, including advocacy for the homeless and hungry, and traveled into the city on Sunday for the papal Mass.

“It was a very moving experience for them,” said Dr. Anna Mae Mayer, director of Salve Regina’s Mercy Center for Spiritual Life. “We along with hundreds of other people stood in the street and attended Mass. The pope-mobile went by about a block away.”

Though all of the students have now returned to academic life, the experience of seeing the pope will remain for many a highlight, one that Father Peter Martyr expects to strengthen their faith.

“I think this is a great sign for the Church in the U.S. to see the Holy Father come set foot on our soil,” he said. “And to bring that new life that’s coming up with the young Church in this country – Pope Francis coming at this point will bolster up that faith.”