

A Visit with Pope Francis Along with Thousands of Others
By John E. Huerta, Junipero Serra High School '61



About September 10, I got the bright idea that I ought to go see Pope Francis when he visits Washington, D.C. a little over 200 miles from Elkins, W.V., to which I retired in 2008, after having worked as the General Counsel of the Smithsonian Institution for the prior 13 years.

I turned to my computer to find out what dates he would be in D.C., and found out that his visit would be on September 23-25. I saw his schedule and determined that my calendar was clear! Now, only if I can arrange to see him up close that would be terrific.

I saw that on Wednesday afternoon, he was going to Canonize Father Junipero Serra at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, but I was too late to request tickets from my local parish.

My other plan was to see if I could get tickets to see the Pope from the West Lawn of the Capitol where he would address the public after his address to the Joint Session of Congress on Thursday morning. I contacted my local W.V. Congressman, and was told I had to put my request in writing and to contact the Congressman's scheduler in the D.C. Office. Figuring this was really a long-shot, I did so, and was pleasantly surprised when the following day I received a phone call informing that there would be two tickets available for me for pick-up on either Tuesday or Wednesday at the Congressman's Office in the Longworth Building.

Firmly believing in putting off until tomorrow what you don't have to do today, I drove into D.C., on Wednesday morning, and picked-up my tickets at the Congressman's Office. Oddly enough, I didn't see many people on the streets of D.C., nor traffic on the City Streets. I stopped by my old office at the Smithsonian to visit some former colleagues at the Office of General Counsel, and I found out that the entire Federal Government was on a liberal leave policy, and almost everyone was "tele-commuting"

from home, which probably means they were watching the Pope on television instead of from their office windows.

On Thursday morning, the gates to the West Lawn of the Capitol opened at 5:00 a.m.; the throngs began to form about 4:00 a.m.. I was oblivious to all of this because I slept into about 7:30 a.m., and took the 8 a.m. Metro into D.C., and walked to the Gate. The Metro was nearly empty about this time, but the streets to the Capitol were full of visitors to see the Pope, and vendors selling Pope Francis T-Shirts and other items.

I carried two small byzantine crucifixes with me to have them blessed by the Pope, so that I could give one to each of my sisters who were unable to come out from the West Coast to see the Pope with me. There was a long line formed to get through security, and after thoroughly checking the crucifixes, and having their superiors re-check the crucifixes, I was permitted to enter with the crucifixes.

Not surprisingly, all of the seats were taken by 9 a.m. when I arrived. I was, however, able to get a 2nd row standing position behind seated individuals in front of a jumbotron on the south side of the West Lawn. The Pope arrived about 9:30 a.m., in a small grey vehicle in the middle of a convoy of rugged SUV's. I saw him pass and waive to us on his way to the Southside of the Capitol to make his entrance for the Joint Session of Congress, which we were easily able to watch on the jumbotron in front of us.

After his address to Congress, he came out to the West Lawn Balcony to address the throngs of the great un-washed. While he was a tiny speck in my direct line of vision to the Balcony, he was bigger than life on the jumbotron. He greeted us in Spanish, the first time that anyone had done this from the U.S. Capitol Balcony, and the crowd roared in approval. I was surprised to hear how many Spanish speakers there were in this multi-lingual crowd.

As the Pope blessed the crowd, I held up the crucifixes, and I saw that others held up rosaries, pictures of loved ones, and some even held their babies high in their arms. It was a a very moving experience. The huge crowd, in tens of thousands, was warm, friendly and glowing with a spirit of sister- and brotherhood. We had to wait, until the Pope left area before we could depart the West lawn area. It felt as if we were one big loving family, as we departed the grounds.