

Praying with the Pope

Rev. Eric J. Hall, of Eastchester Presbyterian Church, was invited by Cardinal Dolan to join in a time of interfaith worship as Pope Francis visited Ground Zero to pay his respects. He reflects on that experience.

It started with the line outside the museum. A couple hundred people waiting to go through security. Next to me a family who lost a loved one - a fire fighter (they carried his helmet with love and respect) - and clergy behind and in front of me. The conversation? This extraordinary event they had (we had) all been invited to. Each had an excitement in their voice as well as a nervousness. This meeting was taking place in no ordinary venue. The fire fighter helmet reminded all of us that this was sacred space - lives sacrificed, lives taken on September 11, 2001.

There were two authentic moments for me. As I sat in the sixth row in front of the stage the Pope entered on the left. As a person who is well over 6 ft tall I get a pretty good view of things but the Pope was tough. Then catching the white of his robes my eyes followed him as he warmly welcomes the group on both sides of the aisle with his eyes. He only shook the hands of the interfaith representatives seated with him. He was not there for any of us. This was not an event as all the others in New York. He was there to pay his respects - his face noticeable disturbed by the event which had drawn him to the place.

The second moment was his invitation to pray. He encouraged love, spoke of tolerance and reminded us of the senseless deaths and the families, friends and city that still grieve. The Pope then asked us to pray. Here representations of practically every faith tradition were assembled and at the Pope's invitation not a sound was heard. Not a picture was taken. Each of us accepted the invitation. You could feel all that is sacred and holy in this space - there in the belly of the site of Ground Zero assembled some 200 ft under ground - God was present.

As a Presbyterian Minister I could not help but see there was a lesson here. No matter where we are. No matter how deep in pain and suffering, doubt and despair when we cannot see the daylight God is present if we dare accept the invitation to pray. And by the way, if you take a moment to look to your left and to your right most often you will find there are others who are just like you and who have accepted the invitation as well.

The Pope left the space and the gathering lingered. We formed a line for the escalader and waited until it would bring all of us back to the light of day. I am grateful for the invitation from Cardinal Dolan to be present. It is an experience I will not soon forget.