

Anti-Catholic bigotry fails to dampen call to love in Philadelphia



Thousands gather around a video screen at 15th Street and JFK Boulevard to watch the papal Mass in Philadelphia Sept. 27. (George P. Matysek Jr./CR Staff)

“Enter that line and you enter the path of destruction!”

That’s what a man holding a sign filled with Bible verses screamed to me as I came close to a security checkpoint for access to the much-anticipated papal Mass in Philadelphia Sept. 27.

It was nearly four hours before the start of the liturgy, and there were already thousands of people in the barely-moving queue. One of the organizers announced that the wait to get through security could last as long as two to three more hours – giving our friend the captive audience he undoubtedly craved.

“You are all going to hell unless you repent!” he shouted.

There was more.

“The pope is an antichrist!”

“Priests are child molesters!”

“Idolaters!”

I had seen his type almost every day of my nearly week-long stay covering the World Meeting of Families, the Festival of Families and the papal Mass. They were few and far between, but somehow still managed to pop up every couple hours.

Let’s just say that dialogue doesn’t come easy to these folks.

When a woman responded to an epithet against the Holy Father, she tried to explain why she loved Pope Francis. She was quickly cut off.

"I rebuke you!" the man bellowed. "Turn from your sin and follow Christ!"

Not wanting to miss Mass and knowing that I wasn't likely to get a good view by the time I made it past security, I walked several blocks back toward City Hall where large video screens were set up so people who couldn't get into the Mass could watch.



Pope Francis is seen on a large video screen near City Hall in Philadelphia Sept. 27. (George P. Matysek Jr./CR Staff)

More of my new-found "friends" were there at the corner of 15th Street and JFK Boulevard, carrying black-and-white signs emblazoned with anti-Catholic slogans. They taunted a crowd that eventually swelled to about 2,000 or more surrounding just one video screen.

What impressed me was the way the Mass-goers responded to the invective.

When two "evangelists" pushed close to where people hoped to watch the liturgy, a group made up mostly of teens wearing bright yellow ribbons around their heads surrounded them. They didn't get angry or hurl insults. Instead, as the protesters decried Catholicism, the young people chanted one phrase back at them over and over, sometimes jumping up and down as they did so: "Jesus loves you!"



Young Catholics shout "Jesus loves you!" to anti-Catholic protesters at the papal Mass in Philadelphia Sept. 27. (George P. Matysek Jr. /CR Staff)

Audrey Konopka, a 14-year-old from Cleveland, told me she was part of the impromptu response because she wanted to show that "we love everyone, and no matter what people do to us, they can't shake what we believe."

The sign bearers left, only to return 15 minutes later. This time, a young bearded priest hopped atop a curb and led the crowd in cheers for Pope Francis - drowning out the negativity and eliciting smiles and cheers from the congregation.

The protesters left and never came back during the celebration.



While anti-Catholics taunt the crowd Sept. 27 in Philadelphia, a young priest leads cheers for the pope. (George P. Matysek Jr./CR Staff)

How ironic that during his homily at a Mass attended by hundreds of thousands, the pope challenged all those listening to think about how they treat each other in their home.

“Do we shout or do we speak to each other with love and tenderness?” the pope asked. “That’s a good way of measuring our love.”

Love was what ruled the day from my vantage point sitting on the street with prayerful believers from around the globe.

When the pope kissed and blessed baby after baby before reaching the sanctuary, I saw many people beside me wipe away tears as collective “awwws!” echoed in the streets.

It was even more inspiring to see some kneeling on the concrete during the consecration. Others waved arms in praise of Jesus while young people sang in many different languages.



A woman raises her hands in prayer while watching the Sept. 27 papal Mass on a large video screen. (George P. Matysek Jr./CR Staff)

“To raise doubts about the working of the Spirit, to give the impression that it cannot take place in those who are not ‘part of our group,’ who are not ‘like us,’ is a dangerous temptation,” the pope said. “Not only does it block conversion to the faith; it is a perversion of faith. Faith opens a window to the presence and working of the Spirit. It shows us that, like happiness, holiness is always tied to little gestures.”

Let’s try to treat each other with love and kindness, no matter what our beliefs may be.

