

Brooklyn youngsters chosen to give pope flowers at airport

BROOKLYN, N.Y. – When she was asked to choose a student to greet Pope Benedict XVI, Barbara Kavanagh, principal of Our Lady of Grace School in Howard Beach, said, “Kaitlin Karcher was the first student to pop into my head.”

Tom Chadzutko, Brooklyn diocesan superintendent of schools, had called Ms. Kavanagh to ask her to suggest a student to present flowers to the pope when he arrives at New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport from Washington April 18.

“Kaitlin is a young woman of grace, is respectful and an example of a young Christian woman,” Ms. Kavanagh said of the eighth-grader.

Kaitlin is one of two youngsters from the Brooklyn Diocese chosen to present flowers to Pope Benedict. The other is Christopher Jordan, a fifth-grader at Divine Mercy Catholic Academy in Ozone Park.

When Ms. Kavanagh called the Karcher home to break the good news, Kathy Karcher, Kaitlin’s mom, answered. She said she was “shocked,” but “very proud, of course.”

“It’s a once in a lifetime experience,” Kathy Karcher told The Tablet, newspaper of the Brooklyn Diocese.

Kaitlin, 13, is the only child of Kathy and Robert Karcher of Howard Beach. The honor student plays basketball, baseball and softball for Our Lady of Grace. She also has been a member of the parish youth ministry prayer group.

Her mother will accompany Kaitlin to the arrival ceremony. “She got to the phone first,” Robert Karcher said, joking. Because only one person can go with Kaitlin, her father will watch the arrival ceremonies at home on TV.

Kaitlin hasn’t bragged about being able to meet the pope, even though the family has been contacted by community newspapers, the New York Daily News and the CBS Morning News for interviews.

Christopher was nominated by Sister Francis Marie Wystepek, a Sister of the Holy Family of Nazareth, who is principal at Divine Mercy.

“This is something I thought he deserved,” she said. “His good Catholic background is something that is very important too. ... I chose (him) based on character and Christian values, and Chris is such a wonderful kid.”

His parents, Scott and Phyllis Jordan, knew a month before Christopher did that he was being considered to greet the pope.

Initially, Christopher’s parents weren’t going to tell him until the morning of April 18, hours before he was to greet the pope.

But when The Tablet published Christopher’s name and Kaitlin’s name, “we had to tell him then!” his father said with a laugh.

“Chris was chosen because of his faith,” said Scott Jordan, who is an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion and a Knight of the Holy Sepulcher.

Christopher said when his principal called him into her office, “I thought I was in trouble!” When she told him the news, he said, “I was like? Wow! I’ll be giving flowers right up next to the pope!”

Christopher, an altar server, has served Mass for four bishops: retired Bishop

Thomas V. Daily of Brooklyn; the current head of the diocese, Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio; and Brooklyn Auxiliary Bishops Frank J. Caggiano and Guy A. Sansaricq. He serves Mass regularly, sometimes as many as four times in one day.

He also had the distinction of serving Mass at the Vatican every morning for seven days over Christmas break in 2006.

“I thought the highlight of my life was going to be in Rome last year,” Christopher said. He was there on a family vacation.

“I was three feet away from the pope and I thought to myself, ‘This is the closest I am ever going to get’. Now, with this ... I think this all just means that I am very, very blessed.”

Contributing to this story was Stefanie Gutierrez.