

Cardinal Keeler honors Basilica's 100,000th visitor

As Rosalie Dohm of Woodbridge, Va. climbed the stairs to the nation's first cathedral Aug. 2, she thought it was unusual that Cardinal William H. Keeler was personally greeting each of the visitors from her parish tour group.

The 66-year-old parishioner of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Lakeridge, Va., then found herself in the spotlight when Cardinal Keeler handed her a package and balloons and congratulated her for being the 100,000th visitor to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary since it reopened last November.

"I'm dumbfounded," said Ms. Dohm, who attended the tour with her parish's Silver Foxes senior citizen group. "I was excited about seeing this place, but wow. What a shock to be told you are the 100,000th visitor since it opened back up to the public." Cardinal Keeler said he was overwhelmed by the number of people who have flocked to the first Catholic Cathedral in the United States since it was restored to the vision of its architect, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the father of American architecture who also designed the U.S. Capitol.

In fact, Ms. Dohm is somewhere in the neighborhood of the 108,000th visitor to the restored Basilica, but the Aug. 2 date was chosen to symbolically honor a visitor to demonstrate the volume of people who have crossed its threshold since November.

With the national spotlight on the Basilica's reconstruction, officials from the Basilica of the Assumption Historic Trust decided to assemble an army of volunteer guides and conduct several organized tours of the building seven days a week, something it only offered once a week before the 30-month, \$34 million restoration began.

"We expected there to be interest in the Basilica once it reopened, but this has been even bigger than we expected," said Mark J. Potter, executive director of the historic trust. "We're already on our second visitor's sign-in book."

Visitors from all over the world have penned their names and addresses in both of the books, with 52 percent affiliated with Catholic organizations and the other 48 percent representing all other religious groups, Mr. Potter said.

The Basilica averages about 12,000 visitors each month, with more than 16,000

entering the U.S. symbol of Catholicism in January, the month that has seen the highest volume to date, he said.

"Some people come for a religious experience," Mr. Potter said, "while others come because they have a particular interest in history or architecture."

The cornerstone of the downtown Baltimore Basilica was laid in 1806.

Pope Pius XI raised Baltimore's original Cathedral to the rank of a minor basilica in 1937, giving it the honor and right to display the papal bell, the papal umbrella and the Pontifical seal.

When Cardinal Keeler became archbishop of Baltimore 18 years ago, he launched a crusade to have the Basilica restored to its original grandeur, but admitted after presenting Ms. Dohm with her "bag of goodies" that he was surprised so many have visited the city's co-cathedral in the eight months since its reopening.

"Of course, (the Basilica) turned out to be more spectacular than we had hoped for," he said while standing on the portico of the historic building. "Visitors take away with them a great sense of history."

In addition to the gifts and balloons presented to Ms. Dohm for being the symbolic 100,000th visitor to the Basilica, she took home the memory that for a moment, "I felt like a celebrity."

"I'm so excited for her," said Jennifer Dohm of Woodbridge, Va., daughter of the big winner. "Things like this don't happen to mom."