

Catholic Throwback Thursday: Remembering the 1996 visit of Blessed Mother Teresa to Baltimore



Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997) in Baltimore on May 30, 1996

“Any man, woman or child feeling unloved with nowhere to go is welcome to come here... I have no gold or silver to give you, but I’m giving you my sisters.”

-Mother Teresa at the 1992 dedication of her Missionaries of Charity “Gift of Hope” hospice for AIDS patients, located in the former St. Wenceslaus convent on Collington Avenue in East Baltimore.

Our encounter with a saint:

I remember the day so clearly:

I had an unsettled feeling all morning as I taught my religion classes at John Carroll. It was May 30, 1996 and Blessed Mother Teresa was scheduled to visit Baltimore later that afternoon. And I wasn’t going to be there....

Mother was scheduled to attend a Mass at the Basilica of the Assumption, our nation’s first cathedral, where 35 of her Missionaries of Charity would renew their vows in her presence. This was the top story on all the local news stations, which included announcements of the closure of Cathedral Street after lunch, along with the notice of possible rush hour traffics delays later that day.

As the day progressed and the unsettled feeling persisted, I came to an abrupt realization that I simply had to stop everything I was doing and make it happen. And I came to this conclusion just 90 minutes before the Mass would start at the Basilica of the Assumption in downtown Baltimore, when I was 30 miles north of the city in Harford County.

Long story short, I called the nearby Catholic school and asked if they could have my children packed up and in the main office for an early sign-out in ten minutes. Having a free final period that day, I quickly packed up my books and made my way

over to St. Margaret's, realizing with dismay that I needed to stop for gas before I got on the highway toward Baltimore City. Obstacles galore met us along the way, including every red light possible....

By the time I got to the packed parking lot located around the corner from the basilica, it was 2:50 p.m. It was actually a miracle that we made it there before 3... The kids and I jogged through the garage and around the corner to find the street closed to cars to accommodate the numerous media vans and TV satellites.

Just as we slowed down in front of the basilica, the most amazing thing happened. The doors opened and out onto the portico stepped Cardinal William Keeler, the Archbishop of Baltimore, accompanied by the diminutive 85-year old Mother Teresa. And we were there!!

My children, dressed in their Catholic school uniforms — ages 7, 9, and 11 - -and I were right at the bottom of the steps in direct view of a press conference with these two incredibly inspiring people. I had my pre-digital camera with me and took a number of great photos.

After the press conference, the children and I made our way in the side door of the capacity-crowd basilica where a very long liturgical procession was ready to begin. I told the kids to follow me closely and we made our way down a side aisle and found a place to stand where we had a perfect view of the entire Mass.

It was amazing to be in the presence of this saintly woman, who I had first seen in 1976 at the International Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia. She had gained much notoriety over those 20 years for her work for the poorest of the poor. I was overcome with gratitude to be there.

We watched as Mother led the vow renewal ceremony, after which she addressed the congregation, asking all of us to pray for her sisters and their apostolate. She asked those in attendance to “give us some of your daughters” so her Sisters can continue to serve the poor and disenfranchised.



Speaking to the congregation on a raised platform to be seen by everyone present



Gathering with Cardinal Keeler

After Mass was over and we waited to leave our standing-room location, I looked

over my shoulder and couldn't believe my eyes... Mother Teresa, who had recessed out in the liturgical line with her sisters, was coming back down the side aisle toward us. Surrounded by security guards, Mother walked right past us with her hands folded as if in prayer, while making eye contact and smiling with her head bowed down toward each of my three children.

It was such a humbling experience to be so close to this holy and inspiring woman. As we joyfully made our way out of the basilica to walk to our car, we saw why Mother Teresa walked past us.... There in the little alleyway next to the basilica was the motor coach bus that her sisters were boarding. Mother was able to slip out the side door by the sacristy and get onto the bus without being overwhelmed by the massive crowds gathered out front.



On the side of the basilica

I will never forget this last-minute, Holy Spirit-inspired, experience as long as I live. God is good.... All the time!!



Visiting the headquarters of Catholic Relief Services earlier that day: Ken Hackett, former CRS president, now US Ambassador to the Holy See, at left with Bishop John Ricard, SSJ. (Photo by CRS staff)



Handwritten note left at the CRS Headquarters

Photos courtesy of The Archdiocese of Baltimore, the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Archdiocesan Archives, and Catholic Relief Services.