

Pope John Paul II: ‘Ho, ho, ho, Secret Service’



Retired Secret Service Agent James Le Gette displays a photo of him with Pope John Paul II while he was assigned to protect the pope during his 1979 visit to the United States. (Owen Sweeney III/Catholic Review File)

The recent announcement that Pope John Paul II will be beatified May 1 brought renewed attention to the late Polish pontiff's intense prayer life and his almost mystic spirituality.

But the pope also had a playful side.

James Le Gette, a Secret Service agent assigned to help protect the pope during the Holy Father's first visit to the United States in 1979, caught a glimpse of that playfulness firsthand. The parishioner of St. John in Severna Park was with the pope at St. Matthew's Cathedral in downtown Washington, Oct. 7.

Joseph Kirk Ryan, former managing editor of The Catholic Review, recounted the story in this snip from a 2005 CR article:

Mr. Le Gette had positioned himself on the landing of a stairway leading down from the floor where the meal for the pope was held.

When he saw the papal party approaching the stairs, Mr. Le Gette looked down the stairs and got on his radio to say, "We're coming for sure."

"I turned back to see where he (the pope) was, because I was concerned about a tumble," Mr. Le Gette said.

That was when the agent saw the pope "hind-saddle coming down the banister."

"I turned around, grabbed him and he grabbed me."

“Ho, ho, ho, Secret Service,” Pope John Paul said.

Mr. Le Gette looked at the rest of the papal party coming down the steps the old-fashioned way.

“Everybody is standing there: ‘What is he doing?’ he recalled. “It was totally impromptu.”