

# **SPECIAL REPORT: Baltimore has special connection to popularizing devotion to the Infant of Prague**

**By George P. Matysek Jr.**

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PRAGUE – Kneeling silently before the 18-inch high statue of the Infant of Prague May 25, Maureen Stansell seemed awed and overjoyed.

Staring intently at the ornately robed figure, the parishioner of St. Andrew by the Bay in Annapolis offered prayers to the Child Jesus – requesting divine aid for friends with cancer, repeating the special intentions of loved ones and seeking an increase in respect for life.

Before coming to the Czech Republic as part of a European pilgrimage led by Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski nine days in late May and early June, Stansell knew little of the famous statue housed in the Church of Our Lady Victorious. She did know that many miracles have been associated with devotion to Christ through the veneration of the statue.

“It just felt so special to be there and to pray there,” Stansell said. “To see Christ as a child teaches us that Jesus was once little and that we can do little things and keep our lives simple.”

Every year, more than 1 million pilgrims from around the globe travel to the Czech Republic, praying in front of the Infant of Prague. They carry on a practice that stretches back hundreds of years.

## **Royal gift**

According to tradition, the statue was crafted in Spain during the first half of the 16th century. Made of a wooden core, the wax-coated figure portrays Christ as a

child whose right hand is raised in blessing, while the left hand holds a sphere topped with a cross – symbolic of Christ’s universal rule.

When Spanish Princess Maria Manrique de Lara came to Bohemia in 1556, she received the statue from her mother as a wedding gift and later gave it to her daughter, Polixena of Lobkowicz. The daughter entrusted it to Carmelite priests in 1628, after she was widowed.

While praying before the statue, a priest named Father Cyrillus is said to have heard the Child Jesus say, “The more you honor me, the more I will bless you.”

Carmelite Father Anastasio Roggero, the priest who pastors the Church of Our Lady Victorious today, said devotion to the Infant of the Prague is on the rise throughout the world – with Baltimore playing a special role in promoting it.

The Society of the Infant Jesus, a ministry that educates people about the Infant of Prague, was founded in Baltimore nearly a decade ago. The organization collects prayer requests, while also raising money for the upkeep of the Church of Our Lady Victorious and the African missionary work of the Carmelite fathers who staff the parish.

“The devotion is growing like mushrooms,” Father Roggero said. “We see people from Australia, New Zealand, Italy, Spain, Portugal, India, Asia, South America, the United States – this is our reality every day.”

Couples unable to have children and those seeking support for difficult financial situations are especially drawn to the devotion.

Father Roggero recalled recently seeing a family from India praying beside the curly-haired statue. They had prayed before a statue of the Child Jesus at a shrine in Bangalore, asking Christ to bless them with a child. They came to Prague in thanksgiving for their answered prayer: a healthy baby girl.

“After, I asked, ‘Which religion?’ “ Father Roggero said. “Do you know the answer? ‘Hindu!’ “

Although the practice of the faith in the Czech Republic is not as strong as it had

been in previous decades, Father Roggero said there still remains a bond to the Infant of Prague among the Czech people that helps connect them to their faith. Every Christmas - a time when many Czechs attend Mass - he asks worshippers their religion. In one of the most atheist countries of Europe, he said, most respond that they have no religion.

“But I ask if they love the Infant Jesus,” the priest said, “and they say ‘yes.’ ”

## **Baltimore ties**

Dr. Michael Cataldo, a professor of behavioral biology at The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore and senior vice president of the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore, has very personal ties to the Infant of Prague.

When his mother, Alice, was nearing the end of her life after a five-month battle with pancreatic cancer, she gave her beloved statue of the Infant of Prague to him. She had prayed the Novena to the Infant of Prague throughout her life.

Cataldo believes the devotion provided special graces to his mother that helped her through her illness. After his mother’s death, Cataldo traveled to Prague with the intention of making a donation to the Church of Our Lady Victorious and to pray before the original statue.

What he thought would be an hour visit turned into a five-hour discussion after he met Father Roggero and felt God calling him to do more. Cataldo founded the Society of the Infant Jesus - starting a North American newsletter to promote devotion to the Infant of Prague and raising nearly \$500,000 in the course of a decade to support Church of Our Lady Victorious and Carmelite missionary work.

Cataldo, whose wife, Marilyn, helps him, receives prayer requests from across North America and forwards them to Prague.

“Some of the petitions we receive bring tears to our eyes,” said Cataldo, a parish corporator at St. Paul in Ellicott City.

The doctor recalled receiving a letter from a Philadelphia couple whose unborn child had been diagnosed with Down syndrome. He personally asked priests to pray for

them while on a visit to the Prague shrine. On his return to the United States, Cataldo received another letter noting that the baby had been born in perfect health.

As a medical expert with expertise in Down syndrome, Cataldo noted that once the condition is diagnosed, it can't be reversed. Some might suggest that there may have been a misdiagnosis in the Philadelphia case, he said, or there just may have been an answered prayer.

"I don't know that this particular devotion is any more important than any other devotion," he said. "They all help people become closer to God."

Devotion to the Infant of Prague seems to center on humility and childlike trust, he said.

"In the New Testament, you read sections about becoming childlike to gain heaven," Cataldo explained. "It's an aspect that draws people's interest."

## **Children of God**

Father Matthew Buening, pastor of St. Paul, Ellicott City, said devotion to the Infant of Prague has taken off in his parish. Two years ago, he gave away hundreds of copies of the statue to children as a Christmas gift. A statue was permanently installed in the church, and parishioners volunteer to change its vestments to match the colors of various liturgical seasons - the practice in Prague. Also like the original, the parish recently topped its statue with a crown.

"Our little kids love it," the pastor said. "I see them dragging their parents to the statue to pray to Jesus."

The parish collects petitions that are faxed to Prague and placed in front of the original artwork.

Father Buening knows the value of making petitions to the Infant of Prague. As a young seminarian, he prayed that God would send him an image of the Infant of Prague as a sign that he was meant to become a priest. Within a week, one of Father Buening's friends gave him an image of the statue - unaware of the seminarian's prayer.

"I know you're not supposed to make deals with God," Father Buening said, "but I was crying when he gave me that."

During a papal visit to the Czech Republic in 2009, Pope Benedict XVI knelt in prayer before the Infant of Prague. The image calls to mind Christ's incarnation, the pope said.

"The figure of the Child Jesus – the tender infant – brings home to us God's closeness and his love," Pope Benedict said. "We come to understand how precious we are in his eyes, because it is through him that we in our turn have become children of God. Every human being is a child of God and therefore our brother or sister, to be welcomed and respected. May our society grasp this truth!"

Visit [tinyurl.com/cr-prague](http://tinyurl.com/cr-prague) for a video report on the Infant of Prague. To send petitions or receive more information about the Infant of Prague, write to: Society of the Infant Jesus, 8630M Guilford Road, Suite 401, Columbia, MD 21046.

*Senior Writer George P. Matysek Jr. accompanied Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski on a pilgrimage to the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary May 23-June 2. This is the first of two reports on the pilgrimage. NEXT: The state of the Catholic faith in Poland since the collapse of Communism.*