

Up close and personal with the pope

By Christopher Gunty

editor@CatholicReview.org

I'm fairly sure that I have never seen a pope without writing about it or taking pictures for publication. That's not a bad thing, but it changes your perspective a bit.

In 1979, when St. John Paul II made his first visit to the U.S., I was a college seminarian, and the pope briefly addressed all the seminarians of the Archdiocese of Chicago at my high school alma mater. Weeks before the visit, I called the local Catholic newspaper to ask if they wanted a story about the event from a seminarian's point of view. The editor asked me to come directly from the event to the newspaper office to write the piece, as they were on deadline for the papal visit special edition.

After we heard Pope John Paul, I headed downtown to the Chicago Catholic offices, sat down at a primitive computer terminal, pounded out my story, submitted it to the managing editor and that was it. It was great to see my byline in that week's paper.

Even better, the following week, I got an unexpected check in the mail for the story. For a college kid, that pizza money was part of the realization that I could make a living at journalism. I wrote a separate piece for my college newspaper.



Christopher Gunty reports from Rome in 2010. (Courtesy Ann Augherton)

Since then, I have covered papal visits to Phoenix, Ariz. (John Paul), and Washington, D.C. (Benedict). For the Phoenix visit, my dual roles as editor of the diocesan newspaper and as assistant chairman of the communications committee for the visit put me in the media van in the papal motorcade, with the privilege of entering each venue with the papal entourage. I still have the lapel pin that gave me unlimited access to within 10 feet of the pope. I was honored to meet a man who is now a

saint, John Paul II, twice, once in Rome and again in Phoenix.

I have been to Rome more than a dozen times, every time coming away with some story or photos for the newspaper. Even when my wife and I (she's also a Catholic journalist) went to Rome for Christmas on our own - without a pilgrim group, for a change - we ended up attending Pope Benedict's Christmas "midnight" Mass, on the photographers' platform, and we both wrote articles and published photos.

My vantage points to see the pope have ranged from up close to way back in the crowds to above the fray (for the beatification of John Paul II, I was on the colonnade above St. Peter's Square). Each one was special.

I often have to remind myself that many people - most Catholics, even - are not as fortunate. They know the priests in their own parish, but many have never met their bishop, and fewer still have seen a pope. The opportunities that a papal visit to the U.S. provide for Catholics to be connected not only to the pope, but also to thousands and tens of thousands of other faithful cannot be minimized.

I'm looking forward to my first chance to see and hear Pope Francis. I've seen the pictures and the video, but I want to see his face as he greets people and I want to hear the tone of his voice. It's one thing to see him on TV. It's altogether something different to be there in person.

And yes, this time too, I'll be writing about it.

Gunty is associate publisher and editor of the Catholic Review.

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