

## **Meeting with Immigrant Families and Children at Our Lady Queen of Angels, Harlem**

### **Friday, September 25, 2015**

Hours before the event at Our Lady Queen of Angels in East Harlem, the venue opened to various groups that received tickets.

Diverse groups of refugees and immigrants, representatives of New York's elementary and high schools, and benefactors were ushered to a hot basement cafeteria for pound cake, soda and water. One electric fan at the end of the hall provided welcome relief.

Students from Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic High School were lined against wall, waiting about two hours to be allowed upstairs to their assigned spots in the hallway connecting the classroom to the gymnasium. They were busy practicing what they were going to say to the Pope.

Migration counselor Elvis Garcia Callejas of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York led a soccer team of undocumented and unaccompanied minors to the cafeteria. They were all wearing brand new jerseys that were given to them for the occasion. The soccer team is a program developed jointly by South Bronx United, which organizes youth soccer leagues in New York, and Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York.

Approximately 90 minutes before the Pope was set to arrive, some 300 attendees (approximately 150 immigrants and refugees and 150 politicians, benefactors and Catholic Charities volunteers) were escorted to the gymnasium in groups, where they waited patiently for the Holy Father's arrival.

On the stage to the right of where the Pope's chair was sitting were Janie and Tom Hill, who have been underwriting Our Lady Queen of Angels for 20 years, making sure that it survived. It almost went out of existence, they stated.

"This visit is about hope, and a love for Pope's vision of commitment to communities that are welcoming communities," said Tom Hill. "The school, he added, "is about "changed lives."

He also gave special mention of JoAnn Walsh, the principal of the school, saying that the school exists only because of her and her leadership,.

Sister Carol Barnes, of the Sisters of Charity of New York, and on the Board of Trustees of Catholic Charities, sat in the front row on the stage. She spoke of Pope Francis as an "incredible spiritual leader" who is showing all people how to "take care of the poor."

At 3:59 p.m., a feed of the Holy Father arriving to the school showed up on a monitor inside. Applause broke out, and those inside could hear the crowd outside screaming.

The Pope spent just under 10 minutes outside greeting students and benefactors. One woman gave a hug to the Holy Father, and the Secret Service was quick to break it up. Francis took a lime green encased cell phone out of the hands of one young student and posed for a selfie with the youth.

At 4:08 p.m., the Pope entered a classroom, where third and fourth grade students and principals from Our Lady Queen Angels, St. Ann, St. Paul and St. Charles Borromeo inner-city Catholic elementary schools were gathered.

The children were standing next to four tables, six kids at each table, divided by school, singing "Make Me a Channel of Your Peace," a hymn based on a prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi.

The Pope entered and puts his hand to his ear, as a playful gesture to encourage the children to sing louder.

A young boy approached the Holy Father and asked him to pray with them. They begin the encounter with a *Hail Mary*.

The students presented school projects on community service, nature and the environment, the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion (Eucharist) and stewardship of resources.

The children from St. Charles Borromeo took the Holy Father to a Smart Board to teach him how to move objects from one side of the board to the other with a swipe of a finger. The Pontiff attempted a few times, until one of the students intervened and told him, "no, do it like this." He was finally successful.

The small classroom was one of the most intimate settings for a gathering with the Pope of his Apostolic Visit to the United States, with just around 35 people present in the room.

Around 4:30 p.m., Pope Francis entered the warm gymnasium, filled with immigrants and refugees helped by Catholic Charities. Every continent was represented in the room, except Antarctica.

All were helped and supported by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York through legal or other service programs.

Four of the groups presented the Holy Father with a gift, beginning with teenagers from a soccer team made up of unaccompanied minors. One youth on the team showed the Holy Father a few of his soccer moves before gifting Pope Francis with a Jersey.

The Pope was then presented with tools from day laborers, stories from American Dreamers and Seekers, and altar linens from Proyecto Madres.

After he was presented with a Cross of Solidarity by Catholic Charities, the Pope gave his address, which seemed to be the most unscripted one of his entire trip.

He began his words with an apology to the teachers for taking time away from the school lessons for the day, although he recognized that "everyone is happy today, I know."

Speaking sincerely to the immigrants and refugees, the Holy Father encouraged those present to be people of joy.

He left those present with "homework:" to pray for the Pope.

After the address a group of immigrants sang a song for the Holy Father in their native language.

Pope Francis then invited the group to pray with him an Our Father, but a Mexican immigrant offered to sing the Our Father. The Holy Father obliged, with the condition that all those gathered would then pray an Our Father with him afterward.

After her song, the singer approached the Pope for a blessing

Before leaving the Pope told the crowd in English, "Don't forget your homework."

The Holy Father spent a few minutes greeting people, including an Asian woman with whom he spent close to a minute. He then departed.

Some New York Politicians present included:

NY Governor Andrew Cuomo

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio

US Senator Kirsten Gillibrand

US Senator Chuck Schumer

New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman

New York City Police Commissioner Bill Bratton

Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr.

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