

Thoughts and Reflections on Pope Francis in New York

Chiara Montalto (September 27, 2015)



When I was asked to write my thoughts and reflections on Pope Francis' visit to New York City and my experience in Central Park, I knew that I could not honestly address that without also talking about another important man to me (and to many other New Yorkers) my uncle. See my Uncle, the Rev. Dr. Andrew Struzzieri is one of the most beloved priests in the Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens. He is currently pastor of St. Clare's in Rosedale, Queens.

Pope Francis - to me -is the embodiment of the Catholic faith I have had the privilege to experience through my Uncle's priesthood in Brooklyn and Queens for my entire life. To me, that is a faith of kindness, humility and love. It's not right or wrong- my religion is no better or worse than anyone else's (nor anyone's lack of faith or religion, to be clear). It is a faith I have witnessed time and again in action, through his example. I've often felt that there was a disconnect between the institution of the Church and the living faith. Just as my Uncle has bridged that disconnect for the last 40 years in Brooklyn and Queens, Pope Francis is now doing in the world.



When the opportunity arose to see the Pope's motorcade in Central Park, I knew it would be an incredibly special day in my life. Though I would have loved to have attended with my Uncle, he had his own special invitation that day- one of the concelebrants of the Mass Pope Francis said at Madison Square Garden.

My dear friend Gillian Camille Winn and I met early in Manhattan, and arrived at our entrance to Central Park before 11:A.M. Though we were among the first at our entrance, a sea of people lined the streets. It was nearly 2.P.M. before we made it through security and into the park. We found a spot at the front of the gate and parked ourselves for the afternoon.

People flowed in slowly and surely, and our little spot soon became a tiny neighborhood: a kind family with a college age son discussing his first week of classes, an Ecuadorian woman with her own radio show, and a strikingly beautiful Mexican woman with her two daughters, one a fourteen year old, Kelsey, and the other, a four year old with Down's syndrome, Sammy.

As Sammy slept, her big sister Kelsey befriended Gillian and me. Soon enough, little Sammy opened her eyes, took one look at me and extended her arms for me to pick her up. I glanced at her mom for permission and scooped the child up. Sammy and I spent the next several hours together. She would not let me put her down, instead staying in my arms taking turns playing games and dozing off. She was an absolute joy. But, of course, by this point our little neighborhood had gotten a lot more populated. Sammy's mom was now somewhat behind me, but Kelsey was by my side, her little sister still in my arms.

At times the force of the crowd pushing up on us was too much, but the police officers kept all under control. The air was joyful and full of love in a way I have never experienced. Kelsey tapped my shoulder. "Chiara, look up," she said pointing upwards toward the gorgeous rainbow in the blue sky directly above our heads. "It's a sign," she said, wiser than her fourteen years. "I believe it," I agreed. "Pope Francis has been sent to deliver the message the world needs, to love each other," Kelsey agreed.

Then the motorcade started coming. NYPD helicopters and fighter jets held the airspace in the sky. Twice more, Kelsey pointed upwards to rainbows in the cloudless sky. "Definitely a sign," she said. The crowd chanted in Spanish "Se ve, se siente, El Papa esta presente." Cell phones were raised, cameras ready. As Pope Francis passed us, without thinking, I raised up little Sammy as high as I could, and just as he passed, he turned and blessed us, I swear looking right at her. I said a silent prayer, tears streaming down my face. In a moment, he was gone. Sammy and Kelsey gave me goodbye hugs and disappeared back into the beautiful mosaic that is New York City.

Later, at Madison Square Garden, in his eloquent homily, Il Papa said it better than I ever could.

"Living in a big city is not always easy. A multicultural context presents many complex challenges. Yet big cities are a reminder of the hidden riches present in our world: in the diversity of its cultures, traditions and historical experiences. In the variety of its languages, costumes and cuisine. Big cities bring together all the different ways which we human beings have discovered to express the meaning of life, wherever we may be."

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