

Religious takes pope's words to heart during four-day pilgrimage

By Sister Elizabeth O'Hara, RSM

It wasn't the most religious of observations, but the people of Philadelphia said on Monday that the four interceptions of the New York Jets by the Philadelphia Eagles football team on Sunday were unmistakable signs of Pope Francis' presence and power. Whether or not Francis had anything to do with the Eagles' win, the people of Philadelphia were ecstatic about having the pope in town.

I arrived in Philadelphia with two other Sisters of Mercy, Sisters Patricia Welsh and Dorothy Lazarick, on Thursday, Sept. 24, for a four-day pilgrimage to encounter Pope Francis. I had read his encyclical and his messages to men and women religious during the Year of Consecrated Life. I was basking in delight at the thought of the pope's mentioning Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton in his speech to Congress earlier that day. I said to myself, "The pope and I are on the same page!"

On Friday the air around the Benjamin Franklin Parkway was electric: city police, Secret Service, TSA, state troopers, and border patrol personnel monitored the growing crowds as they moved in and out of secure zones. My friends and I scouted the area. At the cathedral we visited the grotto of Mary, Undoer of Knots. This was created especially for the pope's visit. We learned that Pope Francis has a special devotion to Mary under this title. The painting is one of his favorites. I wrote a petition and attached my cloth strip to the frame carrying thousands of knotted petitions.

On Saturday morning I joined thousands of people as we gathered at the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul for a glimpse of Pope Francis as the motorcade approached the church. Security issues prevented us from knowing ahead of time the exact route of the motorcade. Because attendance at the Mass was by ticket only, I settled for a Jumbotron view of the ceremony. When Archbishop Chaput of Philadelphia spoke to the pope at the end of Mass, he suggested that the city be named "Francisville," if only for a day. The people outside cheered thunderously.

On Saturday afternoon, Pope Francis spoke to some 30,000 persons at Independence Hall. This, also, was a ticket-only event, so we watched the pope on TV as he emerged from the white doors of Independence Hall and came to the same lectern that Abraham Lincoln used when he delivered the Gettysburg Address. The Independence Hall scene was deeply moving — the pope at Lincoln's lectern, Independence Hall in the background, the message of the founding fathers of our country blending in with Francis' call for equality, dignity, and care for others. The scene was awesome! I felt patriotic, faith-filled, proud of Pope Francis, proud to be a



People gather early on Sept. 26 in front of the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul, Philadelphia, hoping to get a glimpse of Pope Francis as his motorcade approached. Sister O'Hara was among the crowd who watched the Mass on a Jumbotron. When Archbishop Chaput of Philadelphia spoke to the pope at the end of the Mass, he suggested that the city be named "Francisville," if only for a day. Sister O'Hara said, "The people outside cheered thunderously." — *Mercy Sister Elizabeth O'Hara photo*

native of Philadelphia, and grateful for the opportunity to experience this moment.

People refer to The Benjamin Franklin Parkway as the Champs Elysées of Philadelphia. From the Philadelphia Museum of Art (of Rocky fame) to the copper-domed cathedral basilica a mile away, flags of the nations adorn the parkway. At the foot of the art museum, the organizers of the World Meeting of Families 2015 erected a huge stage for the Saturday evening Festival of Families. This event truly echoed Pope Francis' consistent message that the family is the foundation of society. Six families from around the world — Poland, Nigeria, Jordan, Australia, New York, and Argentina — spoke to Pope Francis about their struggles and their faith. Pope Francis, this evening and throughout his visit, repeatedly mentioned grandparents and children as special responsibilities of families.

On Sunday morning, the crowds began to swell in anticipation of the Papal Mass scheduled for 4 p.m. My friends and I had been gifted with reserved seats near the stage, so we were assured of a place for the magnificent Mass. Reports on Monday indicated that 850,000 persons attended the Mass. The Philadelphia Orchestra and accompanying choir provided the music. It was the grand finale to a historic visit of Pope Francis.

The words of Pope Francis that touched me most deeply were spoken at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary on Sunday morning. The pope, emphasizing again the role of the family in the building of a peaceful society, used a powerful example. He asked us to remember long ago when the neighborhood grocery store was an important part of the neighborhood. Families knew the grocer, families knew one another, bonds were formed, there was a neighborhood identity. People

knew when a family was struggling. Families helped one another. The pope then described the current situation where supermarkets have taken the place of the neighborhood grocery. Huge malls provide to consumers all of the current items one could possibly want. Consumerism

is rampant. There are no bonds formed among the people. The pope's words have been with me — they are in my heart. They are the truth.

Mercy Sister Elizabeth O'Hara serves as the diocesan Delegate to the Religious



Prayer Line

In photo above, pilgrims gather to read petitions in the Knotted Grotto at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Peter and St. Paul, Philadelphia. Left, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sister Virginia Quinn, chair of the Theology Department at Immaculata High School, Somerville, holds onto a prayer line at the grotto.

— *CNS and Jolene London photos*