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FOPPE FAMILY RECEIVES HOLY FATHER'S BLESSING



John and Christine Foppe and their daughter Faith Teresa are pictured with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican in early September. In an unexpected twist of events, the Foppes had the rare opportunity of having a personal visit with the Holy Father. He blessed each of them and gave them rosaries bearing the Papal Coat of Arms.

Gotta have Faith

By Vicky Albers
Breese Journal Editor

It was a Tuesday evening in early September. John and Christine Foppe had just settled down with their 14-month-old daughter in their Rome hotel room when the phone rang. Sister Maria Pia, the Mother Superior of the Missionaries of Charity in Southern Italy, had telephoned to tell John that she had arranged for he and his family to be a part of Pope Benedict XVI's Wednesday morning audience at the Vatican.

"She said, 'I've got these tickets and I think they're really good,'" John Foppe recalled.

A Breese native who was born without arms, John had the rare opportunity to be in the papal audience on two previous occasions; therefore, he was aware that after the pope gives his message at about 10:30 a.m., it is then translated in several languages. Knowing that they would have to be on the road by 11:30 a.m. to make their 1:30 p.m. flight to Germany, John and Christine were hesitant to accept the tickets.

Sister Maria Pia reassured them.

"She told us, 'Don't worry, I'll have a driver come get you, and I have the fastest driver in Rome.' She said she would also have a parking place reserved for us in front and we could leave early if we needed to."

Upon their arrival outside Saint Peter Basilica on Wednesday morning, the Foppes initially had second thoughts.

"There was a massive line of people — six people wide and about one and a half miles long, right in front of where we were supposed to park," John said.

Seeing her guests arrive, Sister Maria Pia — whom John said makes up in personality what she lacks in stature — immediately took charge.

"Here is this little nun who just walks up and starts parting this sea of people to let us get through," John said. "While she is doing this, one of the other nuns says, 'The Mother is really working today.'" — meaning the late Mother Teresa of Calcutta, founder of the Missionaries of Charity.

After parking their car, the Foppes, along with their driver, were led by a papal usher to the auditorium where the pope would speak.

"The last thing Sister Maria Pia said to us was 'Just pray that you get to meet the Holy Father,'" John said.

The Foppes, with their daughter playing contentedly on the floor, were standing close to the stage among the thousands who had journeyed to see Pope Benedict XVI that day when a papal usher returned to the auditorium and pointed at John.

"He said, 'You, bring your wife and baby and come with me.'"

The usher led the Foppes back out the way they had entered and took them into a private waiting room.

"We didn't know what was going on," John said. "When the guy pulled us into the room, I thought maybe he was going to reseat us into a handicapped area."

A few different papal ushers and security personnel entered the room and left before one finally came in and announced: "The Holy Father will meet you in a few minutes."

Needless to say, John was stunned.

"Christine said she's never seen me get nervous, but I was nervous," he said. "An older usher had told us that when you meet the pope, the proper greeting is to bow, kiss his ring and call him 'Your Holiness.' So I'm repeating this in my head, 'bow, kiss his ring, call him Your Holiness' 'bow, kiss his ring...' Then, kind of before you know it, the doors open and he was right there."

Foppe said he doesn't really think that anyone told the pope in advance that he would be meeting a man with no arms. "He started to put his hand out for me to grab it and kiss his ring and then he looked down at my sleeves," Foppe said. "He didn't say anything at first and then he offered a blessing and made the sign of the cross on my forehead. I said, 'This is my family.' He then greeted them and blessed them."

Pope Benedict XVI presented the Foppes with rosaries made of white beads which included the Papal Coat of Arms before he turned to exit through another set of doors which led to the crowded auditorium.

"Essentially, we were backstage," Foppe said. "When the doors opened, you could see people and hear the voices 'Viva il Papa.'"

"I was stunned," John said. "We get tickets to be in the papal audience as special guests of the Missionaries of Charity and all of a sudden we have a private meeting with the Holy Father. My first thoughts were: 'I'll be darned, the sisters pulled it off.'"

Arriving back at their car to leave Saint Peter's, the Foppes encountered the sisters who they had seen previously in the day. The Foppes explained that they had to leave early since they had to meet their 1:30 p.m. flight and they shared their story about how they had just been blessed during a private meeting with the pope.

"One of the nuns commented, 'Mother really is working today,'" John said.

Foppe has been to Rome four times in his 38 years, and now he can proudly say he has had the opportunity to personally meet a different pope on three of those four trips.

John was just 6 years old in 1976 when he and his father, Ron Foppe, made a pilgrimage to Europe with a group of handicapped people affiliated with Victorious Missionaries, which is headquartered at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville.



88th	Carlyle Lake Elevation	Precipitation	September 2001	
Year	Fri., September 19	September 1700	September 2102
—	Sun., September 21	September 1800	September 2215
No. 32	Tues., September 23	September 1900	September 2300

“When I saw you I fell in love, and you smiled because you knew.”

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• Faith *(Continued from page 1A)*

While in Rome, the group arranged to be part of the papal audience with Pope Paul VI. "We were sitting in the front row while the pope spoke, but I was 6 years old and a little bored. My dad gave me a rosary to play with and I started tying knots in it with my feet. When he finished his speech, Pope Paul said, 'Bring me the bambino without arms who can do so much with his feet. I want to give him a special blessing.'"

In 2003, John and Christine were traveling to Europe on their honeymoon and were able to make arrangements through former Bishop of Belleville *W i l t o n* Gregory to again be part of the papal audience — this time with Pope John Paul II.

"It was June and there was a section corded off up front to the side of the Pope's platform for all recently married couples," John explained. "After his time with his audience was completed, we were given an opportunity to meet him and receive a blessing."

John feels extremely fortunate to have a third meeting, especially since this one included his daughter.

"It's a once in a lifetime opportunity, but I feel very fortunate," he said. "So many people, thousands, come from all over the world just to be in his presence."

Missionaries of Charity John's own special charity

On June 1, John started a new career as executive director for Community Link, a not-for-profit organization, headquartered in Breese that helps adults and children with developmental disabilities. However, prior to taking on this new role, he had spent 20 years as an international speaker and trainer.

John continues to speak on a selective basis. In fact, the reason for his family's recent trip to Rome was for him to conduct a seminar for international employees of the Kirby (vacuum) Company. While there, he also made arrangements to speak to the group of sisters from the Missionaries of Charity.

"They are kind of like my own personal charity," John explained. "I donate my time and my seminars to them."

The Missionaries of Charity is a Roman Catholic religious order established in 1950 by Mother Teresa, which consists of over 4,500 nuns and is active in 133 countries. One of the sisters' vows is to give wholehearted and free service to the poorest of the poor.

John first became associated with the Missionaries of Charity when he spoke to a group of sisters in Newark, New Jersey. He later gave a speech to a group in Washington, D.C. and the trend has continued.

"When I'm in a country, I let them know," John said. "They are all over the world, so if it works out, I try to meet with them."

Being born without arms, John has learned to break down and re-think every aspect of day-to-day life. This has taught him that the inability to do something doesn't rest on the lack of resources or vision. Instead, it has more to do with one's subconscious perception to meeting a challenge head on.

This is one of the reasons he feels so connected with the Missionaries of Charity.

"They work on the front lines with the poor and actually live with the poor, so their funds are limited. They of all people struggle with how to do more with less," John said.

As founder of the religious order, Mother Teresa forbid the sisters from fundraising.

"If they have to beg, they beg, so they do struggle," John said. "Why I think they're saints is because they do all of this but they are also human beings. They have their own problems and personality conflicts just like we have."

His visit to Rome earlier this month marked John's second time speaking to the Missionaries of Charity in Rome.

While they have several homes, the sisters run a women's shelter and soup kitchen which is in the Vatican City, right outside Saint Peter Basilica. Being special guests of Sister Maria Pia and her fellow sisters was instrumental in the Foppes' intimate meeting with the pope.

"It really shows you the weight that those sisters have in the Vatican," John said.

He admits being simply "humbled to be in their presence."

"They're very holy but not in a disconnected, pious kind of way," he said. "They're smart, yet they work with the rough and tough."

He is also intrigued by their very diverse backgrounds.

"Some never graduated from high school and some have Ph.D.s. It's amazing to have them all in a room together and see all their differences and the diversity of their cultures, yet they're all just so peaceful and simple.

"There are times when I speak that I receive plaques and beautiful statues," he said. "When I finished one of my speeches with the sisters, they sang a song for me, because that was all they had to give. The memory of that beautiful song, by far, was the best gift I could have ever received."

John and Christine also have another special connection with the Missionaries of Charity.

He explained, "A couple of years ago, we were trying to have a baby, and we were having a hard time, so the sisters in New Jersey, who were our initial contacts, said they would pray for Christine."

In February 2007, John gave his first speech to the Missionaries of Charity in Rome and was happy to inform them that his wife was pregnant.

"I told them how their sisters in New Jersey had been praying for Christine and I thanked them for their prayers," John said.

"After my speech, Christine was talking to one of the sisters and telling her that we already knew that the baby would be a girl. The sister then said rather matter-of-factly, 'Oh, and you'll name her Teresa.'"

"We hadn't really given the baby's name much thought yet. We get back to the states, I'm on the phone with Sister Vincent in New Jersey and I tell her how the sister in Rome had said that we need to name the baby Teresa. She laughed and said that was ridiculous and not necessary, then she said, 'But she will become of Missionary of Charity when she's older, won't she?' I thought, 'Oh no, I'm digging a deeper hole.'"

All kidding aside, John and Christine are convinced that the birth of their daughter has been a "true blessing."

"That's why she's named Faith Teresa," he said. "I definitely know that you've got to have faith."

Editor's Note: In his book, "What's Your Excuse? Making the Most of What You Have," John Foppe writes in greater detail about his first trip to the Vatican as a 6-year-old boy. An excerpt from that chapter of his book follows:

"Dad and I were seated on the front row in the basilica. I remember looking around at the building, especially at the members of the Swiss Guard who were standing at either side of the room. They were so serious and immobile that I finally concluded they were statues and not human beings. Before long, I got a little bored and was using my toes to play with a rosary to occupy the time.

"Pope Paul VI noticed me tying knots in a rosary and asked that I be brought to him. According to those who were paying more attention than I, he said, 'Bring me the bambino without arms. I want to give a special blessing to this child without arms who can do so much with his feet. He is very good. I think he needs the blessing, and I wish him a happy life.'"

"I had no idea that was happening until the Swiss Guards began to move toward me. I was shocked that they could walk! Dad and I were escorted to the pope, Dad by that time was in tears, and the pope gave me a blessing, kissed me and handed my father a little leather pouch that held a special papal medal.

"I believe two things happened in that brief encounter. First, Dad received an incredible blessing — he was overwhelmed and very grateful. In some ways, I believe that experience validated to my father that God was deeply concerned about my life and that He had a special purpose for me. My parents no longer saw my disability as tragic but as part of God's plan and purpose for me.

"And second, I received a blessing, although it has taken me a number of years to put it into full perspective.

"I was not healed in that moment. Perhaps I should say, I did not grow arms in that moment. My hips were not instantly straightened or fully strengthened in that moment. What did happen? I believe I received an impartation of spiritual strength to endure what could not be changed and to persevere in overcoming what could be overcome.

"Isn't that what a blessing really does for any of us? It gives us the strength to accept and endure what is, and what cannot be changed. It gives us the fortitude to face with courage and a conquering spirit what can be changed."



Born without arms, John Foppe was just 6 years old in 1976 when he traveled to Europe with his father, Ron Foppe, and a group of handicapped individuals as part of an 18-day pilgrimage to major shrines and holy sites. The highlight of the trip was an opportunity to see Pope Paul VI at the Vatican. John and his father were seated in the front row during the papal audience at St. Peter Basilica. Like any 6-year-old, John got a little bored and began using his toes to play with a rosary to occupy his time. The Pope noticed him tying knots in the rosary and asked that he be brought to him. According to those who were paying more attention than John, the Pope had said, "Bring me the bambino without arms. I want to give a special blessing to this child without arms who can do so much with his feet. He is very good. I think he needs the blessing, and I wish him a happy life."

In Rome on their honeymoon in June 2003, Christine and John Foppe had the opportunity to attend a papal audience and received a special blessing from Pope John Paul II.

