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Hugging Pope Francis was 'dream come true' for Catholic student

Mark Zimmermann Sunday, January 24, 2016 10:05 AM

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During his historic visit to Washington last fall, Pope Francis gave the first papal address to a joint meeting of Congress, visited with the homeless served by Catholic Charities, presided at the first canonization of a saint on U.S. soil, was welcomed by the president at the White House, and at eight different points during his whirlwind two-day visit, was greeted by cheering crowds of Catholic students.

PHOTO BY MARY FRANCES LAHOOD Pope Francis smiles as he is about to hug Theresa Brogan, center, then a freshman from the Academy of the Holy Cross in Kensington, outside the Apostolic Nunciature in Washington on Sept. 23.

Waiting to greet him at his arrivals to and departures from the Apostolic Nunciature, where Pope Francis stayed during his visit to Washington, were cheering groups of Catholic students, in a rotation so young representatives of nearly all of the Archdiocese of Washington's 95 schools and 139 parishes would have a chance to see the pope up close. Pope Francis reacted warmly to the youth, stepping forward to shake hands or pose with selfies with some of them.

In one photo taken outside the nunciature, Pope Francis can be seen breaking into a huge smile, with his arms outstretched, as he is ready to hug Theresa Brogan, then a freshman from the Academy of the Holy Cross in Kensington. Theresa appears to be running into the pope's arms, and behind her, smiling shyly, is Eddie Sloan, a first grader from St. John the Evangelist School in Silver Spring. Both Catholic school students have Down syndrome.

In a recent interview, Theresa Brogan smiled and reflected on that unforgettable moment. "It's amazing! I went up and hugged him!" she said. "…He had this big smile. It's like a dream come true!"

Brogan and some friends representing Catholic groups that serve children with special needs saw the pope arrive at the nunciature at lunchtime on Sept. 23, and thought he was going inside. They had been waiting there for two hours, and thought maybe their hopes for encountering the pope were dashed. But Pope Francis turned back toward the children.

Gina Baldini, a 17-year-old with Down syndrome who had graduated from St. John the Evangelist School, fulfilled a friend's dying wish by bounding past the barricade toward Pope Francis and hugging him. Theresa Brogan and other children with special needs followed her in personally greeting the pope. Gina and Theresa were part of a group representing St. Joseph's House, a family home where children with multiple disabilities receive before and after school care. Cubby LaHood, a parishioner of St. John the Evangelist who founded and operated St. Joseph's House with her husband Dan at their house in Silver Spring, had died two days earlier, but in one of her last visits with Gina, she had encouraged her to run up and embrace Pope Francis.

Cubby's daughter Mary Frances LaHood, who succeeded her mom in serving as executive director of St. Joseph's House, where she grew up with her two siblings, took the photo of Theresa Brogan running toward Pope Francis. Mary Frances, a graduate of the Academy of the Holy Cross, now also teaches religion at her alma mater.

Months later, Theresa Brogan still smiled happily remembering how she met Pope Francis. "Yes, he is a good hugger!" she said. Later, she happily told her friends at Holy Cross about her great adventure, and they said they wished they could have been there with her.

As that scene was unfolding outside the Apostolic Nunciature, Theresa's mom, Mary Brogan, was waiting in a long security line outside The Catholic University of America, waiting to take her seat outside the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception for Pope Francis's canonization Mass for St. Junipero Serra, the famous missionary of California. Suddenly a friend texted Mary Brogan, who remembers the message saying something like, "OMG, I am watching CNN, and Theresa is hugging the pope." Soon Mary Brogan saw a screenshot of her youngest daughter across town, hugging Pope Francis.

Seeing that scene brought tears to the eyes of Mary Brogan. She and her husband Steve have six children, all of whom they sent to Catholic school. Mary Brogan serves on the board of directors for St. Joseph's House, and also for the Catholic Coalition for Special Education, which works to provide educational opportunities for children with special needs at Catholic elementary and high schools. Mary Brogan said she knows the difference that Catholic education has made for all of her children, helping them learn how they can use their God-given gifts to serve others. Brogan said she also understands the heartbreak of parents of special needs children who cannot find a Catholic school to serve them, which motivates the coalition's work in expanding Catholic educational opportunities for those families.

Theresa Brogan, now 16 and a sophomore at the Academy of the Holy Cross, participates in the Moreau Options Program there, an inclusion program supported by a grant and technical assistance from the Catholic Coalition for Special Education. In addition to her classes at Holy Cross, Theresa has acted in two school plays, including "Cinderella" this past fall, and she takes part in the Best Buddies program there, which promotes friendships with children with special needs and their peers. "It's nice to see my friends (there)," Theresa Brogan said. "At Holy Cross, it's like a big family."

Theresa Brogan had another milestone earlier last year, as she joined friends from the Academy of the Holy Cross in bringing up offertory gifts to Cardinal Wuerl at the Archdiocese's Youth Rally and Mass for Life at the Verizon Center. And this past weekend, Theresa Brogan marked a personal milestone, serving as the godmother for her baby niece Mary Claire Martin – Steve and Mary Brogan's first grandchild. Mary Claire, the 8-month-old daughter of Theresa's sister Anne Marie Martin, was baptized at the Shrine of St. Anthony in Boston.

"She's always been an incredible blessing to us," Mary Brogan said of Theresa. She said that photo of Pope Francis smiling as he is about to hug Theresa seems to say it all, about why the pope visited Washington, and the goal of his life and work. And that photo, she added, seems to reflect how the pope recognizes the gifts her daughter has to share.

"He's trying to show us how to love like Christ loved, and you can see that in his face," she said.

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Theresa Brogan added that she feels that Pope Francis's "message was how to help and how to love" people. When he hugged her, she said the smiling pope told her simply, "I love you."

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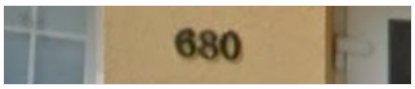

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