Columns
Religious Life



Sr. María Elena Méndez Ochoa of the Guadalupan Missionaries of the Holy Spirit greets Pope Francis in Rome in a private audience for a group of Latin American sisters and a Catholic Extension team April 26. (Courtesy of María Elena Méndez Ochoa from the printed photo taken by the Vatican)



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I was in Rome in 2000 on the occasion of International Youth Day, where I saw Pope John Paul II very close. I participated in Mass celebrated by Pope Benedict XVI in Washington, D.C. in 2008. I attended the International Day of Families in 2015 in Philadelphia, where Pope Francis was present. I can now say, 23 years later, that I have had the joy of being close to the last three popes.

This year, when Francis celebrated the 10th anniversary of his pontificate, I was able to congratulate him personally. That would not have been possible without being part of Catholic Extension's Latin American sisters initiative and St. Mary's University of Minnesota. We are all pursuing bachelor's or master's degrees, while working in ministries in diocesan missionary settings in the United States.

The trip to Rome was originally planned for 2022 but, because of the pandemic, was canceled. Thanks to that cancellation, I was able to participate in the rescheduled trip, since last year I was not yet part of the group. So, I can say that, thanks to the pandemic, I had the grace to firmly shake hands with Francis.

My joy began on the evening of April 18 when I read a WhatsApp message from the Catholic Extension team that said, "We ask that you please be very attentive to your emails tonight, because we will be sending a very important email with all the information about the trip to Rome."

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At four o'clock in the morning, like a little girl who enthusiastically wakes up to see what the Three Kings had brought her, I opened the email containing the details for our stay in Rome. What excited me the most was the news that on Wednesday, April 26, at 8 a.m. Rome time, we would have a private audience with Francis.

Overwhelmed with emotion, I later prepared a sign, just in case I was allowed to display it in his presence. It said: "Thank you, Pope Francis, for your ten years of service to the Church. We love you and pray for you!"

One of the most valuable aspects of the experience was the opportunity for sisters to reflect on "the understanding of person, dialogue, encounter, leadership, and the management of power in the millennial Christian city of Rome." The chance to integrate the experience of synodality with the perspective of our congregational charisms, cultures, ministries and leadership was also very important.



Sr. María Elena Méndez Ochoa stands on a Tiber River bridge in Rome. In the background is St. Peter's Basilica and a beautiful sunset. (Gabriela Ramirez)

We left for the Vatican on April 26 at 6:30 a.m., since our appointment with the pope was at 8:00 a.m. The excitement, nervousness and joy we experienced while waiting for the Holy Father was remarkable. We already knew the protocols: The pope does not like people to kneel before him or kiss his ring. Aware of that, I was also ready to seize whatever spontaneous moment presented itself.

Precisely at 8:00 a.m., the Holy Father walked through the door with a firm and light step, joyful, smiling, and greeting the audience. He was dressed in white, and his face was radiant.

I could not believe that this man, who has difficulty sitting and standing, carries the weight of the church on his shoulders. Without a doubt, he preaches with his life a God who is close, tender, and compassionate — "God's style," which is the way he invited us to express ourselves in the pastoral work that we do in the face of a "throwaway culture."



Sr. María Elena Méndez Ochoa stands in front of the Vatican with a sign she made to congratulate Pope Francis on his 10th anniversary as pope. (Gabriela Ramirez)

The pope insisted that "caring for the needs of the poor" helps society. This phrase seems contrary to what society thinks, but, on further reflection, it makes sense, because society, the church, the person and the community are transformed when a person is helped to grow and to overcome poverty, and when their dignity is valued.

Another phrase that touched me very much was that "the Church is a rich tapestry made of many individual threads ... woven into unity by the Holy Spirit."

A small group of 45 sisters from different congregations and charisms, various countries, and diverse pastoral and leadership experiences had woven this tapestry together, with the Spirit, in 10 days. Our presence, dressed in many colors, was a sign of diversity, synodality and interpersonal relationships. We discovered that significant encounters are possible when they are interwoven with the love of God and our vocational call to serve the poorest in society in our ministries.



The group of Latin American sisters and the Catholic Extension team pose in front of St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. (Courtesy of María Elena Méndez Ochoa)

I believe that all the sisters and the Catholic Extension committee were ecstatic with the presence of the pope; it was enough to see their faces, expressions and their gestures of joy. We felt as if we were on the top of a mountain, just as the disciples were when they saw Jesus transfigured, with his white garments and radiant face.

We all saw, heard and touched Francis, standing only inches away from us. The peace and joy in my heart were so great that I wanted to pitch "three tents" and stay there longer; however, it was not possible because the Holy Father had his general audience immediately following our visit. We had to go back to St. Peter's Square to listen to him with all the people who had gathered from various parts of the world.

Being in Rome, greeting the pope personally and encountering the faith of Peter, Paul and the Christian martyrs of the first centuries of the church, was a human, spiritual and historical experience that transformed my life forever.

Thank you, Pope Francis, for your faith, your love, and your witness of closeness.

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