

2008 Apostolic Visit of
Pope Benedict XVI
April 2008

Celebrating Our Place at the Table
Jan Benton
Executive Director
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The recent visit to Washington, DC and New York by the Holy Father was a wonderful experience of our Catholic family coming together to celebrate all that it means to be Catholic. For children and adults with disabilities, it was an especially rich time to feel a part of the family. The Holy Father and all those planning his trip made it clear that we were not only welcome, but that we belonged. Opportunities were extended for a public witness in Washington and a private meeting in New York. Accommodations were made at both masses so that Catholics with assorted disabilities were able to be present and fully participate. In Washington, a selected group of young (and older) adults with disabilities represented us all as they processed with the gifts to the Holy Father waiting at the altar. To have been one of four groups symbolizing our Catholic community selected to bear these gifts was truly an honor and a recognition of our valued place in the family.

Watching Pope Benedict taking time to bless each child and greet family members and caregivers in the chapel at St. Joseph's Seminary in New York was another graced moment. His words to the children and their families touched our hearts and gave us not only great hope but a sense of purpose: "God has blessed you with life, and with differing talents and gifts. Through these you are able to serve him and society in various ways. While some people's contributions seem great and others' more modest, the witness value of our efforts is always a sign of hope for everyone." He went on to assure us of God's love and that our lives do indeed hold purpose: "Sometimes it is challenging to find a reason for what appears only as a difficulty to be overcome or even pain to be endured... God's unconditional love, which bathes every human individual, points to a meaning and purpose for all human life." He concluded by exhorting us to pray for him and others each day and to "become bearers of [Christ's] hope and charity for others."

Prior to the Papal visit, families were calling the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) and the Archdiocese of Washington Office of Ministry with Disabilities directed by Peg Kolm expressing their desire to share in the Holy Father's visit. On April 16 families from Corpus Christi, TX and Chicago, IL joined local families and NCPD board members from Salt Lake City, Boston, and Columbus in a Witness to Pope Benedict. We celebrated liturgy, then made our way to a selected spot on the Holy Father's procession route from the USCCB building up 4th St., NE to the Basilica, waiting expectantly with thousands of other eager pilgrims. The Ruiz family of

Corpus Christi offered the following reflections on the witness: “Being invited was an incredible honor. The Mass was beautiful and I will forever remember the spiritual impact of our family celebrating Mass in D.C. while also waiting for the arrival of Pope Benedict XVI. Our family will be forever blessed to have shared this once in a lifetime experience within a very special community of families from across the nation, remembering with special thoughts always the many in our world like Aaron, Dayton and Larry. They are truly a light and a *witness* for all to feel the spiritual meaning of “Christ Our Hope.”

As part of our witness, we held a banner expressing our gratitude to Pope Benedict: *Holy Father, thank you for valuing and defending our lives.* NCPD board member Karen Murray, who directs the Office for People with Disabilities for the Archdiocese of Boston, explains the significance of our message, “As a lifelong Catholic with a disability, it is a highlight of my life to be here at this moment. I am here to express my joy and gratitude for all that the Holy Father has said and done to uphold and proclaim the dignity and worth of every human person. I thank him for his unwavering defense of life and pray that his message will be heard and received by everyone who hears it.”

Catholics with disabilities and their families from throughout the U.S. join with Karen to indeed thank Pope Benedict for his words of affirmation and hope which have strengthened us and given us a renewed sense of purpose in living our faith as a witness to Christ’s unfailing love.

This article is found on the USCCB Papal Visit Blog at <http://usccb.wordpress.com/>.

Sharing Gifts with the Holy Father

Special to *The Catholic Standard* (Archdiocese of Washington) May 1, 2008

Peg Kolm is the coordinator in the Office of Ministry for Persons with Disabilities in Department for Social Concerns in the Archdiocese of Washington.

We answered the call. If you saw the Mass at Nationals Stadium, you would have seen several groups of gift bearers, the last group from our community...persons with special needs. We had a representative from the Archdiocese’s Center for Deaf Ministries, Godwin Ofodu, as well as Theresa Travis from the Blind Awareness project. And Colleen Moores represented persons with physical disabilities. But for me, the most meaningful participant was James Oppido, an adult with Down Syndrome. James has a job, lives with other adults, and is an active participant at St. Philip in Camp Springs. He *has* a life, as our young people would say, and it is a good one. Pope Benedict XVI’s cousin was also a young person with Down Syndrome. In 1941 the Nazi government took the 14 year old away from his the family for “therapy,” and the young man was never seen again. The Nazis systematically eliminated what

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August, 2008

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they called ‘useless eaters’ who, they argued, were a burden to society. Later, the Ratzinger family learned that the cousin had died; he was probably murdered by the Nazis, in what the Bishop of Munster in 1941 called a “ghastly doctrine” to justify the killing of blameless men and women.

What must it have felt like to lose a cousin at that age, and in that way? For the rest of his life, our Holy Father has had to live without his cousin. The sacrifice made by the Ratzinger family to promote a “biomedical vision” of a perfect society must make our Holy Father’s opposition to abortion and embryonic stem cell research even more personal. So when persons with disabilities were asked to have a role at the Papal Mass, I knew one of them had to honor and represent that cousin, that loss. What no one really knew till the morning of April 17 was that James Oppido would be the *first* of the gift bearers from our community.

It gets better.... James was entrusted to carry the paten with the large host that the Pope would later consecrate. We as a church are called to protect all human life, all of us being graced by God to be “fit eaters,” with James Oppido being our chosen one to carry to the Pope the very Bread that makes our salvation possible.

That morning, as the group made their way slowly up the altar, James, in his excitement, processed, well, rather quickly up to the Pope. Up until then, our Holy Father had received the other archdiocesan gift bearers while seated in his chair. But when James arrived on the altar, the Pope rose and walked out to greet the joyful person that had bounded up before him. He took the host from James, and then met and blessed the four gift bearers and their two companions, Janice Benton and Joseph LaHood. And so it was that these men and women witnessed their very lives to all of us, reminding us that life indeed is a gift, a gift from our heavenly Father. The call of the Pope’s cousin had been heard, and in some small way, answered.

Thank you, Holy Father!

Special to *The Catholic Standard* (Archdiocese of Washington), May 1, 2008

Janice L. Benton, SFO, Executive Director of the National Catholic Partnership on Disability

Pope Benedict XVI gave a great gift this past week to so many people during his visit to the Archdioceses of Washington and New York. What an exciting time it was for all of us!

Catholics with disabilities witnessed to the Holy Father in a number of ways. They were represented at the White House welcoming ceremony, extended a greeting to the Holy Father as he traveled 4th Street, NE to the Basilica, and were part of the offertory procession during the Papal Liturgy at Nationals Stadium. In addition, children with disabilities and their families met with the Holy Father on

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Saturday at a chapel of St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, NY. The young people presented a gift and song to Pope Benedict. The Archdiocesan Deaf Choir also performed a song.

The National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) hosted fifty Catholic children and adults from throughout the country who offered a special message to the Holy Father during his procession to the Basilica on Wednesday, April 16. This opportunity was created in response to the deep longing of many people with disabilities from throughout the U.S. who contacted NCPD and the Archdiocese of Washington, expressing their desire to be in solidarity with the Holy Father during his visit. The group celebrated Liturgy together and were then ushered to a selected section of the procession route where they offered their message of gratitude via a banner: *Holy Father, thank you for valuing and defending our lives.*

NCPD board member Karen Murray, who traveled from Boston, reflects on the message to Pope Benedict, "As a lifelong Catholic with a disability it is a highlight of my life to be here at this moment. I am here to express my joy and gratitude for all that the Holy Father has said and done to uphold and proclaim the dignity and worth of every human person. I thank him for his unwavering defense of life and pray that his message will be heard and received by everyone who hears it." NCPD executive director, Janice Benton explains further, "We were sorrowed to learn that the Holy Father lost a cousin with Down Syndrome to the experimentation of 'undesirables' during the Holocaust. We applaud him for speaking out in defense of life and against society's targeting of people diagnosed with Down Syndrome and other genetic conditions, over 80% of whom are eliminated through abortion."

The Holy Father affirmed the value of our lives and the gifts that we have to share on Saturday afternoon when he spoke with young people with disabilities at Saint Joseph Seminary: "God has blessed you with life, and with differing talents and gifts. Through these you are able to serve him and society in various ways. While some people's contributions seem great and others' more modest, the witness value of our efforts is always a sign of hope for everyone." He went on to assure us of God's love and that our lives do indeed hold purpose: "Sometimes it is challenging to find a reason for what appears only as a difficulty to be overcome or even pain to be endured... God's unconditional love, which bathes every human individual, points to a meaning and purpose for all human life." He concluded by exhorting us to pray for him and others each day and to "become bearers of [Christ's] hope and charity for others."

We pray that all of us will embrace and live by the Holy Father's charge, and through our actions extend these profound beliefs to an often cynical and fearful society.