

Sister Bernadine Meets Pope John Paul

January 18, 1982

Editors Note: We recently received a communiqué from Sister Alice Grommesh, O.S.F. of St. Francis Convent in Hankinson with the news that Sister Bernardine Bickler, who served at the Towner County Memorial Hospital in Cando for a number of years had the rare experience of meeting the Holy Father in Rome. The following is a letter from her.

Wonders never cease! The entire community of LaStorta just returned from St. Peter's in the Vatican where we were honored and privileged to attend the Holy Mass of Pope John Paul II in his private Chapel! Praise God for big favors!

Yesterday, January 17, the Holy Father's secretary called and invited all the Sisters working at our Generalate in LaStorta to attend the Holy Father's Mass on Monday, the 18. He asked how many would be coming and we answered 19. He said that we all may come.

The Convent was alive with great anticipation. At once we began to make preparations. First of all, a gift basket was prepared with bread, ham, sausage, eggs, butter, coffee, Nurnberger Lebkuchen, Wine from Franken, chocolates, and a large German calendar. One basket was not enough; a second and a third were found. They looked beautiful, decorated with tangerines, oranges and lemons with green leaves and twigs; all from our trees right outside our kitchen.

Early in the morning of January 18 we left promptly at 5:45 a.m. in three cars and arrived at the Vatican at the Bronze Door at 6:30. We were counted by the Swiss Guards to be sure that we were not more than 19. We walked up three flights of stairs and then had to wait in a large room. Here four priests, six lay people and a Sister from another Community joined us. Again we were counted, most likely for security. Then a Swiss Guard in civilian clothes led us to the Holy Father's apartments. We went up another three flights, but this time, by elevator. Here the Swiss Guards were on duty. In a few minutes the Holy Father's private secretary met us and led us to a large room where we deposited our gifts and took off our coats. The secretary gave us permission to record the Mass of the Holy Father. In silence and in awe we followed him through the Holy Father's private library to the chapel.

Here, we beheld the Holy Father in deep prayer kneeling in the center aisle before the altar. What a deep spiritual awareness was impressed upon us at the Vicar of Christ knelt there. I was thinking: what must it be like when some day we meet Jesus face to face!

As the Holy Father got up to go to the altar, he turned and smiled. Four priests concelebrated with him. During the Holy Mass, he showed deep devotion, but when he turned to the people, he looked alive and interested. The mass prayers were in Italian; we sang in German; one of our Sisters, Sister Idelphonsa, read the first lesson in Italian. She, then, intoned the "Alleluia" before the Gospel. In this song of praise we were all united: the Holy Father, his Polish people, the Italians, the Germans, the Americans, and all. The Holy Father himself distributed Communion to us. When he gave us the blessing, all of you, dear Sisters, relatives and friends, were included. For the recessional, we sang "Holy God, we praise Thy Name." Then the Holy Father returned to his kneeler and we left the chapel quietly.

His Secretary lined us up in a semi-circle in the private library. Soon the Holy Father appeared and spoke with each one of us. A photographer followed him and took many photos. As the Holy Father approached our group, he said, "Oh yes, these Sisters are German." Sister Irma, our Mother General, explained that we are Dillingen Franciscans with our Motherhouse in Dillingen, Germany, and our generalate in Rome-LaStorta. Sister Irma told him that we are waiting for the approval of our Constitutions and that we beg his blessing on this work.

Then we presented him our gifts from our German kitchen in LaStorta, Italy. He looked at the baskets and got very excited about them. He said, "One could make a meditation on these." Seeing the eggs he spontaneously said, "But, these eggs are Italian - from Rome!" Then he asked Sister Irma how many novices we have. She responded: "Ten in Germany, 9 in Brazil, and 3 in America."

The Holy Father greeted each one of us, blessed us, and gave each a white Pontifical rosary. To Sister Irma, he gave two with the comment, "These are for you because the Mother General has to pray more rosaries."

As he came to the last Sister, his secretary whispered us to sing "Silent Night." Singing; we assembled before the Christmas tree for a group photo. The Holy Father sang second voice. Since he did not know the second stanza, he hummed along.

The Holy Father looked rather tired; of course, he meets many people and he worries a lot about his homeland, Poland. This a great suffering for him.

How very much I wish I could share this great event with you in person. However be assured that you were all with me in spirit and in prayer. Whenever I visit any of these holy places or St. Peters Basilica, I always take my Sisters, my friends and family with me. The Holy Father reminds us of Christ walking the streets of Galilee and people from everywhere flocking to him and wanting just to touch the hem of his garment to be healed physically. We didn't only touch him but shook his hands and spoke to him. Such an encounter is impossible to describe. We praise and thank God for making this possible for us. It was a great gift.

Soon I shall be again in Hankinson. Until then, my prayers and love,

Sister Bernardine Bickler, OSF