

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 7, 2013 at 12:16pm

Pope Francis creates moments of connection on Assisi trip

by Joshua J. McElwee

Assisi, Italy — The open-aired popemobile stopped Friday about a block northwest of the cathedral of this central Italian hamlet. Pope Francis climbed down and began to walk along a fenced area where people had gathered. He spent the next 10 minutes shaking hands and having short moments of conversation.

The pope lingered in conversation with one man, both of them smiling widely. Then, suddenly, the man reached over the fence and placed a black baseball cap over the pontiff's white zucchetto.

The cap, emblazoned with an orange logo, stayed on the pope's head for about a minute. Attendants took it away as the pontiff continued to walk down the line.

It was a quick moment, but, like many moments described by participants in the pope's first visit to the home of his 13th-century namesake, St. Francis, it was one of deep connection.

The man who gave the pope his hat was Giulio Bocchini, a native of Spello, Italy, a town about a 15-minute drive southeast of Assisi.

Bocchini organizes an annual festival that celebrates the Catholic feast of Corpus Domini by decorating streets of Spello with intricate carpets made of flower petals and stems. He said he told the pope some of the festival's organizers spent several days preparing a flower carpet just for his visit.

The carpet, which showed images of Jesus and St. Francis in brilliant colors, lined the street in front of Assisi's Cathedral of St. Rufino. Bocchini said he encouraged the pope to walk on the carpet, as Spello's bishop normally does during the annual festival, called *Le infiorate*.

"I told him, 'We do it for the Corpus Domini [the Body of Christ], and you represent God on earth, so you have the right to walk on the carpet because of that,' " Bocchini said.

"No, no, no," Bocchini said the pope replied. "God and me, we're two different things. We're very far away."

After hearing that, Bocchini said he placed his own hat, adorned with the festival's logo and made by festival organizers, on the pope's head.

"Since then, he is now one of us," Bocchini said.

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Fr. Gerardo Balbi also had a few minutes with the pope.

Balbi, a priest of Italy's Gubbio diocese, about an hour north of Assisi, was present Friday morning when the pope visited the Serafico Institute of Assisi, an organization that helps with the rehabilitation of severely disabled children across Italy.

Balbi, who is blind and attended the institute in the 1960s, said he had been playing the piano as the pope spoke to the children, some of whom were moaning and crying because of their conditions.

"It was amazing to see that the pope was really, really moved," said Balbi, who now serves as a pastor of a parish in Umbertide, Italy.

"They are very noisy," he said about the children at the institute. "And [the pope] was speaking very softly, so it was hard to hear him. But he was really so moved, he was whispering almost."

As the pope left, he shook hands and hugged several of the people with the institute, including Balbi.

"It was just a few words," Balbi said. "I just told [the pope] who I was and what I did. And then he said he admired me."

For Franciscan Fr. Sergio Prena, the point of connection with the pontiff came after the pope celebrated Mass on Friday outside the Basilica of Saint Francis, where the remains of the saint are kept in an unadorned crypt.

Prena, who now lives in the nearby town of Orvieto, said he previously spent 10 years living in Assisi while serving on a team of friars who attend to the Porziuncola, a very small church repaired by St. Francis to serve as the headquarters of his order.

Partly because of that connection, Prena was invited to be one of many concelebrating the Mass with the pope, he said.

"And at the end of the Mass, he greeted those who had celebrated with him within the basilica," Prena

said.

"In greeting him very usually, with a kiss and a hug, very jokingly I told him, 'Thank you for this beautiful gift of the visit to Assisi,' " he said.

"Just pray for me," Prena said the pope replied.

"And that was very nice," Prena said. "Maybe the greatest emotion was not to have seen the pope, but to have heard him tell me, 'Pray for me.' "

Two families sitting together outside the Basilica of St. Francis said they, like Prena, also had a moment of personal connection with the pope.

Gloria, the mother of one of the families, said she was particularly moved by the way the pope used his homily that morning to meditate on the life of St. Francis before entering into a continued prayer to his namesake.

Gloria, whose family came from a town outside Gubbio, said she paid special attention to the pope's request that the saint "teach us to be instruments of peace, of that peace which has its source in God, the peace which Jesus has brought us."

"At the moment, I see so much aggression among people," she said. "People just burst out. And I would like people to be more loving and open to one another."

"Maybe within the church it is not so easy to see these things," she continued. "But also the church could be a very good mediator in helping people to find their serenity."

Gloria's young daughter, Giulia, said she "felt so many different things today."

"In all my life, I never saw the pope," she said.

As the pope left the piazza following the Mass to eat lunch with poor people at Assisi's Caritas Center, Giulia said she watched with her younger brother as the popemobile drove through the crowd.

"I was shouting, 'Viva il papa!' " she said. "And then he turned around and he said 'Hello' by waving his hand. I was shaking."

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Source URL (retrieved on 05/27/2018 - 12:22pm): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-francis-creates-moments-connection-assisi-trip>

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