

COLLEGIATE TIMES

Catholic students make pilgrimage for historic Pope visit

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[The World Meeting of Families](#) is an international conference that brings together families every three years and will be held in Philadelphia from Sept. 22 to 25.

The pilgrimage tradition began in Rome in 1994 by Pope John Paul II and typically coincides with a papal visit, with previous destinations including Milan, Rio de Janeiro and Manila.

This year, the [Newman Community](#) of Virginia Tech, an on-campus Catholic ministry, will be making a pilgrimage to the event to see Pope Francis, who will be present as a part of his first visit to the United States.

“Once we found out about that, we knew we had to go,” said Lindsey Neimo, a Newman intern and graduate student majoring in nonprofit management. “The whole purpose of the Newman community is to bring people closer to Christ and have that experience, and nothing is going to be better than this experience this weekend.”

Neimo and other members of the Newman staff, including Father David Sharland, the Chaplain and director of campus ministry, and Irene Saul, the director of development, have overcome various logistical challenges. Three Coach buses will depart at noon Friday, carrying 160 students to an empty convent, where they will stay packed in until Sunday night.

“We have friends who work in food sciences, so this morning, we hard-boiled 450 eggs in their broilers and we have them cooling in their cooler system so we can bring them with us,” Neimo said. “We’re hoping to hit where we’re staying by 7:30 or 8 p.m., where we will be greeted by 60 pizzas. We’ll dive into those and everybody settle in and do some prayer and really just get our heads centered around the awesomeness of the weekend but also the craziness of it.”

On Saturday, the group will walk to the National Shrine of St. John Neumann, attend mass by their own Father David and visit cathedrals in town. The festival where Pope Francis will speak will begin at 4 p.m., followed by a [concert](#) with performers such as Mark Wahlberg, Aretha Franklin and The Fray.

“The thought of me being in the same place as the vicar of Christ is unheard of. It’s something that I can’t imagine. I can’t believe I’ve been blessed with such an opportunity, and I’m so excited to encounter it,” said Daniel Mehr, a senior industrial and systems engineering major and member of the Newman community. “I am so excited — could not be more pumped.”

Dressed in matching t-shirts with rosary in hand, the group will stand outside Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary in anticipation of seeing Pope Francis pass by. Then they will attend [mass celebrated by the Pope](#) on Sunday at 4 p.m. outside the Philadelphia Art Museum, where they will be close enough to receive the Eucharist.

"We're gonna have to walk a lot and we're not going to shower, but if everybody smells bad, it's fine," said Kate Burke, a junior economics and computational modeling and data analytics major and member of Newman. "I'm excited that everybody's excited. Especially the way Pope Francis is approaching certain things, it just sheds a lot of light on how kind and loving the Catholic Church truly is, which is something I think a lot of people overlook. "I think that Pope Francis in general is just a good reminder to always care for your neighbor, to care for the lowly ones, for anyone who needs help, even if it may not be readily obvious that they need help or you may not want to help them," Burke said.

Burke has seen the Pope once before during the procession of Corpus Christi in Rome two summers ago. But for a majority, it will be their first time.

"An opportunity to see him come here is like a pilgrimage; it's a part of your spiritual journey. It's not just, 'Oh, we're going to see a famous person,' you're seeing somebody who leads your church and leads your church closer to God," said Christian Williams, a senior psychology major and member of Newman. "Going there and seeing 1 or 2 million Catholics in Philadelphia shows the universal church and shows how big the Catholic Church is in the world." Students embarking on the pilgrimage are predominantly Catholic and are of all years, including graduate students. The trip fee is \$50 for students, including food and lodging and is a result of donor support, grants, sponsorships and fundraising. Some students attending had Friday night exams rescheduled for 7 a.m. Monday, after an estimated return time of 3 a.m.

"We have 160 college-age students who are willing to take three days out of their life to go see the Pope," said Daniel Mehr, a senior industrial and systems engineering major and member of Newman. "I think it's just such a beautiful opportunity that God has blessed us with, and I'm so excited to experience it." Through logistical challenges and last-minute swaps and sign-ups, the Newman staff and community are optimistic, with continuous echoes of excitement.

"I think, for me, this is going to be the most powerful experience for us as a Newman community," Neimo said. "The world is changing because it doesn't matter if you're Catholic or Jewish or no religion at all – he's shaking up the world. There's something about him that people want to know more about: we want to know his faith, we want to know how he loves so well."

The three-day trip will be an opportunity to strengthen faith and build fellowship for Catholic students on campus, members of the community and other attendees.

"Not only being close to the Pope, who's the head of the Catholic church, but being around millions of people who are going to be there for the same reason – it's all worth it," Neimo said. "We have overcome it with a lot of jokes and a lot of laughter and covered ourselves in peanut butter, trying to make sandwiches."

Armed with hundreds of packed lunches, sleeping bags and open minds and hearts, the community hopes to grow closer in both their faith and with each other, anticipating great stories that will last a lifetime.

"The fact that I'm going to see him hasn't hit yet. I think it's beautiful that the Newman community was blessed with such an opportunity," Mehr said. "God provides."