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A unique UNIV encounter

It was a long-time dream to join thousands of other young pilgrims in Rome with the Pope for a group of young Australians and New Zealanders, but for some the reality surpassed their imaginations, as they came face to face with Pope Francis.

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Of all the young students travelling to Rome, those from 'Down Under' had the furthest to go. A 17-hour

flight took the ‘Kiwis’ only to Doha, before another 8-hour flight into Rome. It was a similar journey for the Aussies.

For Tim, from New Zealand, and Simon from Australia, it was their very first time in the Eternal City. They had white tickets in their hands on the Wednesday, the day of the Papal Audience. Pope Francis had briefly toured the piazza before addressing the pilgrims from all over the world.

Tim said he had prayed for the Holy Father every day and wasn’t going to let him come so close without giving him a proper greeting.

“It took us a while to find out where we were actually supposed to go. And after getting mixed instructions from various officials, we found our place quite close to the Pope but separated by two barriers.”

“After the Pope had finished the audience, we squeezed our way up to the inner barrier, behind people who were going to get to actually greet the Holy Father. As he was coming around to our side, Simon managed to grab the Holy Father's attention who, after smiling at him, somewhat motioned for him to climb over!

“In a moment of spontaneity and without really thinking about it, Simon jumped over the barrier and I quickly clambered after him, losing one of my shoes! Simon gave Pope Francis a big hug and I followed, giving him a kiss on both cheeks. It was a surreal, unforgettable moment and of course, over too quickly!”

Simon said “It was awesome. Coming all the way from Australia, I wasn't going to let a barrier and three metres stop me from meeting the Pope.

“I’ll never forget how the Pope gestured to me, almost shrugging his shoulder, giving me the freedom to make up my own mind but encouraging me at the same time.”

“I made the leap of faith and gave him a hug. We looked each other in the eyes, the gateway to the soul. It was very moving. I couldn't help but think what it would've been like to meet Jesus when he was walking around the towns and villages of Palestine.”

Simon said the whole UNIV forum defied his expectations.

“It was as if I was a country kid coming to the big city for the first time. Walking into St Peter’s square is always special - it makes your jaw drop. One of the older guys in our group said it was like getting a hug from the arms of mother church - he couldn’t have been more right. It was moving to see so many young people

coming to the heart of our Catholic faith. You realise there is a lot of people out there, from all corners of the world, with a solid faith. You can't help but think there's something, or rather Someone, behind it all."

Xavier is also an Australian, from Melbourne, and didn't have to jump any physical barriers to get to the Pope but he broke through the language barrier by practising a bit of Spanish beforehand.

"We actually chatted for a minute or so, which was a real treat. I told him where I was from, and that I prayed for him every day. He asked me to keep doing so, saying 'Thank you, I need it.' And after he went to greet the next person, he came back to me and this time spoke in English and said: 'Don't forget!' How could I forget now?

“I was struck by his humility, affection and joy. Despite the fact that he was meeting so many people in such a short space of time, he made an effort to pay attention to everyone he talked to. He really takes an interest in every individual.”

The Holy Father inspired the young pilgrims not to lose the enthusiasm of their youth once the first years of their commitment to God had already flown by. In the Easter ceremonies he told all the Church that “Our Lord is inviting all of us to follow Him with joy and to love God and neighbour with an unconditional love....He invites you to go back to the time and place of your first love and he says to you: Do not be afraid, follow me.”

It is quite a project to organise a visit from so far away, but increasingly larger numbers from Australia and New Zealand are flocking to Rome to

take part in the week-long congress. Not everyone will get to meet Pope Francis in person, but every pilgrim has a unique and personal encounter with Christ, through daily prayer and the sacraments, and visiting the important historic sites of early Christianity.

This year's visit was the 50th anniversary of the UNIV Forum. A real focus was the theme of building up society for the future. Later this year, the Pope will convene the special synod on the youth.

“What attracts me to UNIV,” said Simon, “is the focus on getting young people to think about how they can help society. We hear a lot about playing our role in the Church, which is important, but often we can forget that our task is really to take our place alongside our peers and offer positive and constructive solutions for the problems we see around us.

It's not enough to have a Christian mindset - we have to use the Christian ideals to improve things for the poorest of the poor. Otherwise we just aren't following the command of Christ.”

“This trip has inspired me to do more. I want to take part in more volunteer work and get involved in the service projects that are organised from my city. I've been to Vietnam and helped build homes for very poor people who have nothing, and as the Pope says, that's where we really have to be - among the people, and live with the ‘smell of the sheep’.”

Tim said that's something he can easily do back home.

“Yes well we have 60 million sheep in New Zealand and I think there's about 75 million in Australia,” he said.

“But yes, we do need to accompany people more. Not everyone is on the same path as us, and perhaps only a few will journey to Rome to see the successor of St Peter, but we have to find ways to reach them where they are at and speak in a language they can understand.”

“And getting them to help their fellow citizens is a way to move their hearts – anyone can do that, but at times they need to be encouraged a little bit more to be generous.”

“I’m looking forward to getting back and helping my friends and hopefully I can bring some of them back to Rome next year.”