

“I enjoyed being able to give the Pope something back”

On the anniversary of Pope Francis' election, Vicky talks about what it meant to her to be able to speak to him and bring him a taste of his homeland after some general audiences in Rome.

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My name is Vicky. I'm a teacher. I grew up in Texas, but my family is Argentinian and so, luckily, with my

visits there and my extended family, I've been able to keep some of those traditions and cultural customs, one of them being drinking *mate*. *Mate* is more than a drink: it's something that you share with other people, so it involves friendship, conversation... It's an encounter with someone else. You literally share the same gourd that you drink from.

I lived in Rome these past few years. I studied abroad there, and when you live in Rome, you are very close to the Pope, Pope Francis. He shows this closeness to people like Jesus did. Jesus was with the poor, the sinners, people from the peripheries... Pope Francis has also really made a point to be there with everyone and for everyone.

This closeness of his has allowed me to be also close to him. And my “in” with him has been being able to give him *mate*. Between the first time I

gave him mate and the second time, there was three months in between. When he saw me the second time, he looked at me and was like, “*¿Pero vos, qué hacés acá?*” which is, “But what are you doing here?” Like, “How did you... Why are you here again?” So immediately he recognized me, when my previous encounter had been maybe a twenty-second thing.

In these encounters, I've noticed this closeness, not just with me, but with the people around me. If it's my friend's birthday and I tell him, he wishes her a happy birthday or gives her a rosary for her birthday. If there are little kids around, he gives them candy as well, and they're super excited because they've got “holy candy.” My friend once asked him to pray for her brother, and he asked for his name, so he could pray for him by name, which is really special. He's asked where I'm from, he asks

how I'm doing... He's teased me about whether the mate tastes good or not today, whether it's too cold or too hot.

It's very natural for one to say, when you see the Holy Father, at least for me, to say, "Holy Father, I'm praying a lot for you." And I say it genuinely. But immediately (he did this to me and also to my mom, when she said it), he said, "Don't say you pray 'a lot.' Just take out the 'a lot' and say, 'I pray,' and that's when I'll believe you. Otherwise I don't really believe you." So he really wants us to pray a lot for him, and he relies on those prayers.

I really had to reflect on how much I pray for the pope, and for whoever the pope is, in any time. The pope will always need the support; they always need our support, since the first pope, Saint Peter. They need our prayers, they need our affection. And

I've enjoyed being able to give him a little something back, because he gives so much to all of us with all the work that he does, all that he prays, all the things he carries on his shoulders, of the whole world. Giving him this little taste of his home country, this nostalgic drink, has been really special for me. It's been like giving drink to the thirsty, literally.

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