

# Pasco priest recalls 'beautiful moment' with Pope Francis

As Pope Francis gave a homily, Rev. Garry Welsh was feet away.



Rev. Garry Welsh, of St. Anthony Catholic Church in San Antonio, concelebrated Mass with Pope Francis in Philadelphia last weekend. Courtesy of Rev. Garry Welsh



**By Arleen Spenceley, Times Staff Writer**

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**SAN ANTONIO** — On Sunday morning, the Rev. Garry Welsh took a 10-minute walk along the Benjamin Franklin Parkway from a Philadelphia hotel to a security checkpoint.

There, the Secret Service stopped him.

Welsh, 48, a Catholic priest and the pastor at St. Anthony Catholic Church in San Antonio, presented his credentials: a press pass and a ticket.

Then, he was on his way — to concelebrate Mass with Pope Francis.

Welsh was in Philly for the World Meeting of Families, which he attended for Spirit FM 90.5, the radio station owned by the Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg.

He reported live from the city. He heard confessions. He hoped to cross paths with the pope, who in his homilies and speeches "pulled no punches," Welsh said.

In Philadelphia, he said, the pope challenged the church.

"That was the message of the World Meeting of Families," Welsh said. "It's a challenge to be family today."

But, Welsh said, the pope also listed reasons to have hope.

"It doesn't matter what your family has been, but what your family can be going forward," Welsh said.

Plus, he recalled, Francis issued a reminder: "There is no sin you have committed that cannot be forgiven. You may turn your back on God, but he never turns his back on you.

"That's what the papal visit has highlighted to me."

Earlier during the weekend, Welsh had attended the pope's Mass on Saturday and the pope's Sunday morning meeting with bishops. But the highlight was the Sunday Mass outside the Philadelphia Art Museum. Welsh had applied in advance to concelebrate it and was granted permission.



Before Mass, he attended a brunch for priests at the museum. Then, he prepared for Mass and found his seat, about 75 feet from where the pope would preach a homily.

The crowd was loud. But "when the Holy Father came around, it went silent," Welsh said.

During Mass, Welsh stood with fellow priests about 50 feet from the altar. They prayed the eucharistic prayer with the pope. Then, they helped distribute communion.

"There's the Holy Father, giving out communion behind me," Welsh said. "I've got to confess: I wanted to take a selfie."

He resisted.

"Don't screw this up, Welsh," he thought. "Your boss is watching."

After Mass, he walked with other priests back toward the art museum. But the Secret Service stopped them. The papal motorcade was coming.

As it passed, Pope Francis stopped his Fiat, Welsh said, a few feet from where he stood.

He tried for a selfie with the pope but dropped his phone, which broke. So, he turned back toward the Fiat.

"I got to look right at Pope Francis," he said, who thanked the priests, blessed them and asked for their prayers.

"I got to savor a beautiful moment," Welsh said. "And then, the Secret Service handed me back my phone."

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