

## Minnesota layman embraces Pope Francis



In an extraordinary sign of affection, a Catholic from Minneapolis embraced Pope Francis on Thursday during a private audience.

The lay-initiated gesture represents another verification of the way Francis has touched people's hearts as well as a papal informality he has generated and encouraged as pope.

Gene Frey, chairman of Wabash Management Inc. in Minneapolis and a trustee at University of St. Thomas in the Twin Cities, was part of a Papal Foundation delegation visiting Rome. He hugged Francis in a reception line.

The foundation is made up of men and women who raise and give money for a variety of charitable, educational and apostolic projects around the world. (One of Gene's sons, Jim, serves on the board of the National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company.)

During the audience, Francis expressed his gratitude to the group. He singled out in particular its assistance in helping to train "a new generation of leaders whose minds and hearts are shaped by the truth of the Gospel, the wisdom of Catholic social teaching and a profound sense of communion with the universal Church in her service to the entire human family." (See the full text of Francis' remarks.)

"Amazing is an understatement," said Frey by telephone from Rome hours after he embraced the pope. For weeks, he had spoken to friends about his deep affection for Francis and the human urge to hug him. He wanted to be respectful but also wanted to share with Francis a human embrace. Given the opportunity, he had said he just might go ahead and act on the spirit within.

The opportunity came following the formal part of the audience, when Frey came to the head of a reception line accompanied by his wife, Mary. First, the men shook hands.

"Then I looked into his eyes and asked, 'Holy Father, can I embrace you?' I thought the word 'embrace' would best translate into Spanish that he could most easily understand. He then he put his arms out -- and we hugged." As he embraced Francis, Mary placed her right hand on Francis' left arm.

"I had this feeling of calm and peace unlike I ever could have imagined. Then I stood back and said, 'Our whole family loves you.' "

Following the audience, Frey had a difficult time putting his thoughts and feelings into words. He said he was still struggling to get a measure of the meaning of what had just happened and how it fits into his life. At one point, he said that the audience, the greeting, the hug had validated his faith as he had not expected. "It's been all very validating," he said.

Thinking back, he added: "It was really a double hug." Frey said the embrace occurred in European style. He explained they held each other, placing their heads one each of the others' shoulders, one after the other.

Historically, papal audiences have been formal affairs. Not long ago, women, greeting a pope, would dress in black, wear hats and veils. However, over the years these formalities have slowly been peeled back. Francis, meanwhile, sets his own course, often acting out on impulse.

While Francis' predecessors once sat in elevated chairs, Francis generally sits at ground level. Meeting with a group of religious from Latin America last year, he sat in a circle with women and men religious. He has attempted to show his feel of closeness to ordinary people.

Despite Francis' approachability, the decision to hug a pope can raise eyebrows. "They might shoot you," Frey recalled his wife warning him when he first shared the idea with her.

"I replied, 'What a way to go. In Francis' arms.'

"As we left, Mary said to me: 'Well, you pulled it off.' "

The audience over, Frey still aglow, he said it would take some time to fully settle in.

It was then he recalled one more part of this exceptional story -- one that would be shared for many years within the family and beyond. Apologizing that this important recollection should have come first of all, Frey said that during what seemed like a timeless embrace with Francis, the pope whispered something into his ear. He said in a soft voice: "Please pray for me."

Thomas C. Fox is NCR publisher