News
Ministry



Mercy Sister Celeste Mary Poche, a staff member of the Bishops’ Office for U.S. Visitors to the Vatican, gives a brief orientation at the Casa Santa Maria of the Pontifical North American College in Rome Feb. 4, 2025. The visitors' office distributes tickets to papal audiences and provides information and guidance to visitors and pilgrims. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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Smiles, laughter, prayer and strategizing abound at the Bishops' Office for U.S. Visitors to the Vatican.

Just a few blocks from Rome's famous Trevi Fountain, the visitors' office is where hundreds of Americans — and not only — go on Tuesday afternoons to pick up their tickets for the pope's weekly general audience on Wednesdays.

They are welcomed by the Mercy Sisters of Alma, Michigan, aided by U.S. priests and seminarians studying in Rome. The office is sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Pontifical North American College.

After requesting tickets online before beginning their journeys, the visitors pick up their tickets at the office in Rome and receive clear information on when to get to the Vatican for the audience and what to bring or not bring — metal water bottles and rolling suitcases topping the no-no list.

The sisters also explain that sitting near the central aisle in the audience hall or near any barricade in St. Peter's Square will give guests the best chance to see Pope Francis up close.

And, at least at the visitors' orientation Feb. 4, Mercy Sister Celeste Mary Poche spilled the beans about sitting or standing near a baby — always a pope magnet.

Mercy Sister Maria Juan Anderson, coordinator of the visitors' office, told Catholic News Service that the visitors include all sorts of people of all ages. Some are very active in their parishes, and some are not Catholic.

The orientation offered to visitors includes some catechesis, although it does not look or sound like a CCD class. The sisters explain who the pope is, why he is important and what the meaning of his blessing is.

They also briefly talk about the sacraments and their availability in Rome, including at the visitors' office, which is located in the Casa Santa Maria, the residence for U.S. priests doing graduate studies in Rome.

"The sacraments are gifts to us from God. They are how we receive his grace and his mercy," Sister Maria Juan said.

"What I have found in my two and a half years here is, if you just take a little bit of time and lovingly and disarmingly make the catechesis about confession available to people," many will want to take advantage of that while in Rome, she told CNS.

"You just simply say the truth: We are all sinners. We all need healing from these wounds that we experience, and there is a remedy for sin, and it is God's mercy, and we have priests here available who want to hear confessions," she said.

Sister Maria Juan also always tells visitors that if it has been a long time since they have been to confession and they do not remember what to say, they should just tell the priest that and he will be happy to walk them through it.

"Every single week we have a line" for confessions. "Every week we have two priests hearing confessions for two hours," she said. "And during our busy seasons, I would say it is pretty common to have four to six priests hearing confessions for two hours."

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In the low season for pilgrims and tourists — January and February — the sisters hand out about 300 of the free audience tickets each week. The number climbs to 900-1,000 tickets a week during Holy Week, the Easter season and for the pope's Mass on Christmas Eve.

While every guest is special, extra fuss is made over the newlywed couples who sit in a special section at the pope's audience, receive a special blessing from him and usually get their photos taken with him. The brides wear their wedding gowns or other white dresses and the grooms wear suits and ties.

In the space of just a few minutes Feb. 4, three couples who were married Feb. 1 arrived to pick up their tickets. Sister Maria Juan introduced them to each other, and

they were soon sharing about their weddings in Philadelphia, Houston and Lafayette, Louisiana, how long they were engaged and what their honeymoon plans were.

Later, a newlywed couple with two children arrived and so did a couple who were married civilly for more than 20 years before having their marriage convalidated by the church. They, too, would sit in the newlyweds' section at the audience.

All the couples met Francis at the end of his general audience Feb. 5.

CNS asked Sister Maria Juan, "Have you met the pope?"

"I have not — I know 'cobbler sons,' right?" she said, referencing the old saying, "The cobbler's children have no shoes" to mean people do not always benefit from the services they provide others.

But, she said, "I am really happy that I can help other people every week have the opportunity to see the Holy Father, receive his blessing and hopefully encounter the church in a meaningful way in God's mercy."