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People welcome ‘our’ pope

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Nothing respects rank less than a car with a dwindling supply of gas. Wilton Gregory, archbishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta, knew that. He turned off the road to fill his car before it stranded him.

Moments later, another motorist pulled alongside — a Methodist minister, also needing gas. They were friends, greeted each other with smiles.

The topic as gas pumps hummed and beeped: Pope Francis. The pontiff will visit Washington, New York and Philadelphia this week. It is, the two agreed, a big event. Millions of pilgrims are expected.

Cars filled, bills paid, the clergymen bade each other goodbye. As the Methodist prepared to drive away, he had a final thought: “I love our pope,” he said.

A week later, that conversation remained fresh in the archbishop’s memory.

“He didn’t say *the* pope. He didn’t say *your* pope,” Gregory said in a recent interview. “He said *our* pope.”

That quick exchange between two men of the cloth underscores just how thoroughly this pope has extended his influence beyond the Roman Catholic Church. His message about living simply, of giving charitably, has touched chords in churches, cathedrals, synagogues. And that’s just in houses of worship.

The pope has had an impact in the secular world, too. What other pontiff has posed for selfies?

Gregory understands. Francis’ call for a simpler life was a factor in Gregory’s decision last year not to live in a newly built Buckhead mansion. Instead, he chose more moderate accommodations in Smyrna.

Francis, he said, “belongs to the world community.”

And the world community, like communities everywhere, is far from unanimous on this latest leader.

This pope is “spectacularly popular,” said Father Thomas Reese, a senior analyst with the National Catholic Reporter newspaper. “He has a very high rating from both Catholics and non-Catholics.”

But his numbers aren’t the best. In a 2014 Pew Research Center survey of popes, Francis was a few points shy of a predecessor, Pope John Paul II.

Still, Reese said, the pope will get a rock-star greeting. “(H)e’s coming to visit the richest and most powerful country in the world. He’s going to come here and talk about issues such as concern for poor refugees, peace and justice, care for the environment and in a country that can really make a difference (on those issues).”

Not everyone will be receptive, he said. Some “don’t like what he has to say about capitalization, globalization and the marketplace.”

These issues, and more, will be aired, discussed, whispered and pondered this week. All the while, the world’s 266th pope will do what he does best — stir imagination and emotion.

“The pontiff should resist the temptation to pontificate in areas where he may not have studied all the facts regarding complex issues such as so-called global warming and the pros and cons of capitalism,” said political pundit Phil Kent of TV’s *The Georgia Gang*. “He would be wise to stick to the traditional tenets of the Christian faith, rather than succumb to preaching from the liberal Gospel of St. Trendy.”

An ambassador for the church

The pope has prompted some Catholics to return to church, said Father Joseph Mueller, the assistant chair of [Marquette University](#)’s theology department. Mueller, like Francis, is a Jesuit priest; he has watched the pope with interest.

This latest pope, said Mueller, 55, has “fascinated” Catholics and non-Catholics on television and in publications across the world. “He’s a head of state, and most heads of state aren’t as spontaneous with the media as he is.”

A fascination that extends to theologians, too. When Francis was named pope in 2013, said Mueller, he was attending a National Council of Churches conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico. He and other church leaders knew an announcement from the Vatican was imminent. Suddenly, they heard bells pealing in the church up the street.

“We all stopped,” Mueller said. “Everybody applauded.”

Women would applaud if the pope did more to correct inequities in the church, said Diane Dougherty, an Avondale Estates resident. A former nun, she made news in 2012 when the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests ordained her a priest. This is a position the church limits to men. The Vatican has never recognized her as a priest. That rankles Dougherty, 70, who thinks the church should open all levels of leadership to women.

On Thursday, while the pope is traveling between Washington, D.C., and New York, Dougherty and other members of the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests will ordain three women to be bishops in Latin America, Canada and the United States. The ceremony will take place in suburban Philadelphia — close enough, she hopes, for the pontiff to notice.

“Until we stand as equals with him (Francis), he’s preaching a God who is sexist and discriminatory,” Dougherty said. “And that’s heresy.”

The pope also has preached against the “unfettered pursuit of money” — a dig, many say, at capitalism.

The pope’s criticisms are misplaced, said Marian Tupi, a senior policy analyst for the Cato Institute, a Washington nonprofit that stresses free enterprise. Tupi recently chaired a conference, “Blessing or Curse: Capitalism Through the Pope’s Eyes.”

Because he’s an Argentine, Francis is familiar with a marketplace where corporations and the government are closely linked, Tupi said. “Corporations rise and fall depending on whether they are in the government’s favor,” he said. “The pope has a very distorted view of capitalism.”

The pope “just hasn’t lived through some of the good that can be expected from capitalism,” said the Rev. Bryan Wright, senior pastor at Johnson Ferry Baptist Church. Wright, 63, who founded the church more than three decades ago, led the Southern Baptist Convention from 2010 through 2012.

The pope has excelled in other areas, Wright said. “He’s created a sense of good-will for the church,” Wright said. “He’s done a good job of speaking for the poor, speaking for the suffering.”

If the two met, Wright said, “I would ask him how I could best pray for him.”

Among the people

John Phillip Knight II, of Buford, is flying to Washington to see the pope. With him will be 68 fellow-travelers, young men who, like him, are studying for the priesthood.

“He’s not just a pope,” said Knight, 28, who plans to finish his studies in three years and assume a position in the Archdiocese of Atlanta. “He’s human.”

Translation: Francis has made it his mission to mingle among those who may not feel welcome in the church. “He’s with the people, constantly, and he wants to make sure he’s representing something bigger than him.”

Because of Francis’ influence, said Knight, he anticipates a life dealing with people outside the walls of his church. “Jesus Christ,” he said, “did not just hang out with people who were the faithful.”

In Fayetteville, 18 students from Our Lady of Mercy Catholic High School have decided not to hang out with their peers next weekend at their school’s annual homecoming. They’re traveling to Philadelphia to see the pope. Tomas Londono, 14, is making the trip.

“I’m not going to be able to go” to homecoming, he said, “but the pope is much more important, and I’ll probably never have the opportunity to see him again.”

Carmen Luisa Coya- van Duijn is going to New York to see Francis. A parishioner at Prince of Peace Catholic Church, in Flowery Branch, she’s going to translate the pope’s message for crowds gathered at Madison Square Garden on Friday. He’ll be speaking in Spanish; she’ll convert it to English.

When she learned that officials in New York had asked her to help, said van Duijn, 43, parish priests had to calm her down.

“It was a blessing,” she said. “I was humbled. I said, ‘Thank you, God. Thank you, God.’”

‘Breath of fresh air’

Julian Zayas, 24, does not consider himself a follower of any religion, but there’s something about this pope that intrigues him.

“I think he is in sync with younger generations, considering that he has a Twitter account [with 7 million followers], and he’s not like the previous (popes) who didn’t care to speak to the younger generations in ways that they could understand,” Zayas said.

Consider this unlikely fan: Ed Buckner, former president of the Atlanta Freethought Society, and an atheist.

“He’s a breath of fresh air, compared to recent popes,” said Buckner. “I think the pope’s heart is in the right place, really I do.”

Buckner takes issue with church policy regarding birth control. Women in poor countries, he said, desperately need access to contraception.

“He has the human touch,” said Monsignor Jim Schillinger, director of ongoing formation of priests for the Archdiocese of Atlanta. “I think people can identify with him.”

Schillinger, 58, a former pastor of Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church in Atlanta, is traveling to Philadelphia this week. For Schillinger, the trip is something of a homecoming: He grew up there. Schillinger doesn't look forward to the crowds he'll encounter in his hometown, but that's OK.

"I'm excited about this pope," he said.

So is Gregory, head of the Atlanta archdiocese. He'll be in Washington, where he'll join American bishops for an audience with the pontiff at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle.

Years ago, said Gregory, he met the man who one day would be pope. They were at a bishops' senate in Rome. "I think we shook hands over a coffee break," said Gregory, who smiled. "I'm not sure he remembers it."

Will they shake hands over coffee, as they did 14 years earlier? Gregory laughed. The odds aren't likely that everyone will get a few moments with the Catholic Church's leader, he said. But who knows?

"He might stop to talk," Gregory said.

So, you like this pope, archbishop?

Gregory, eyes twinkling, remembered that conversation with his Methodist friend.

"I *love* this pope."