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From Texas to East Coast, Pilgrimage to See the Pope

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Michael Stravato for The New York Times

Ricky Pequeño Jr., 17, right, with his father, Ricardo Sr., and sisters, Andrea, 11, and Rachel, 8. Ricky has two tickets to Nationals Park in Washington, where Pope Benedict XVI plans to celebrate Mass on Thursday during his first papal visit to America.

By [RALPH BLUMENTHAL](#)
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SPRING, Tex. — The [Texas](#) sky was still dark and studded with stars Sunday when Ricky Pequeño Jr., rubbing sleep from his eyes, stumbled downstairs to add his bag to a pile of backpacks, sleeping bags, food cooler, baseball glove and ball, football, drum and guitar — everything a family of ardent Roman Catholics might need for a 1,600-mile pilgrimage to see the pope.

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The Faithful

Articles in this series will follow members of the Pequeño family as they travel to Washington and New York from Houston to see Pope Benedict XVI.

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They would end up in a borrowed van with a hastily added trailer and, with little spare cash and no overnight reservations, set off. "It's up to God in the end," said Ricky's father, Ricardo Sr., 44, a machinist who grew up in Mexico, before driving off for a final blessing from their pastor.

As [Pope Benedict XVI](#) prepared for his first papal voyage to America, Mr. Pequeño and his family — his Mexican-born wife, Maria, 40; Ricky, 17; Andrea, 11; Rachel, 8; and Emily, 3 — and 14 neighbors were leaving from this blue-collar suburb north of Houston in two packed vans, headed for [Washington](#) and New York and, they hoped, at least a glimpse of the pontiff.

"We don't know if we'll ever see Benedict up close," said Rosalind Alvarez, a fellow passenger. But Ms. Alvarez added, "Somehow the word he says is going to reach us."

Only Ricky had a prized ticket — two, in fact — to enter Nationals Park in Washington, where the pope is to celebrate Mass on Thursday. They were gifts from his pastor, the Rev. Miguel Solorzano of St. Charles Borromeo Church in Houston, who had managed to get 11 from his bishop, although he had asked for 100.

Ricky had once voiced an interest in the priesthood, and Father Solorzano said he wanted to encourage the boy. Ricky ended up inviting a friend, a girl. "He's young," the priest said, laughing.

With the church struggling to stem an erosion of faith in the face of secularism and scandal, the fast-growing Hispanic population of Texas and the Southwest has long been a major bulwark of Roman Catholicism in America — and an avid constituency for Pope Benedict's visit.

The Pequeños and their fellow pilgrims are a particularly ardent band. They are followers of the Neocatechumenal Way, a communitarian church movement, founded in Spain in the 1960s and accepted by the [Vatican](#), that emphasizes a return to early Christian roots, evangelism, intense religious practice and sacrifice.

The Pequeños' house is filled with Bibles and Christian images. Over the fireplace hangs a copy of an icon by the Spanish painter Francisco (Kiko) Argüello, who co-founded the movement.

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[A Pilgrimage to See the Pope](#)
Family's Journey Begins in Texas

Before they joined, Mr. Pequeño said, "we would just go to church for Sundays and holidays." Now they go several times a week, he said, and often evangelize door to door, sometimes playing music.

"We use a lot of instruments," added Ricky, who plays the drum. "The devil uses a lot of noise, and we fight against the devil, also with a lot of noise."



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The family credits their faith for helping them through many crises. Mr. and Mrs. Pequeño, who migrated to the United States from Mexico and became citizens, said their marriage had undergone strains. Mr. Pequeño said he complained about his wife but learned through prayer that “the way to change my wife is me.” He said they were also distraught when a medical condition prevented his wife from bearing more children. They prayed over it, he said, and quickly learned of a 2-year-old girl needing adoption. They happily took in the child, Emily.

Mr. Pequeño earns about \$45,000 a year making couplings for oil-drilling tools. Mrs. Pequeño studied cosmetology and hopes to get a license soon.

The family, then living in a poor neighborhood in the Greenspoint section of Houston, was traumatized in 2005 when Ricky fell in with a gang, began committing petty crimes and vandalism, and was kicked out of school. (He said he had no police record.) Comrades, he said, savagely turned on him, forcing the family to flee for safety and often change addresses before settling in Spring two months ago.

“That’s when I started getting into the church a lot,” said Ricky, who now expresses contrition.

A junior in high school — he lost a year — he said he had considered becoming a priest but now feels attracted to a career in law enforcement, perhaps with the [F.B.I.](#) “I like solving crimes, things of that nature,” he said.

Father Solorzano said he knew of Ricky’s problems and credited God’s workings.

This is not the Pequeños’ first trip to see Pope Benedict. In 2005, leaving the younger children with a relative, Ricky and his parents spent almost \$5,000 to travel with a group to World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany, attended by the pope, although they were too far away to see him. The family raised money for the trip by holding garage sales and other fund-raisers. In Europe, they detoured to Amsterdam, where they say they proselytized among prostitutes and drug addicts, and visited a former German concentration camp.

This pilgrimage — in showery April, like Chaucer’s to Canterbury — will be cheaper, although the Pequeños figure it should cost about \$1,000 in gas alone, which the travelers will split. The pilgrims, who hope to make side trips to Christian shrines like the tomb of St. John Neumann in Philadelphia, expected to lodge free with other Neocatechumenal followers but planned to stay in a motel Sunday in Tennessee.

Early Sunday, as the pile of luggage by their door grew to alarming proportions, Mrs. Pequeño carried a still-sleeping Emily to the family’s Chevrolet Suburban and strapped her in. Ricky retrieved sports equipment his mother had removed from the pile and restored it.

“We can get bored,” he said.

Andrea, who had been wearing a jokey T-shirt reading “Doesn’t Play Well With Others,” exchanged it for one reading simply, “Benedict XVI.”

The sun was coming up.

“Ricardo!” Mrs. Pequeño shouted to her husband. “Vamanos!”

They set off to a rendezvous point at St. Charles Borromeo Church, where the Pequeños and their neighbors swapped vehicles. Mr. Pequeño took over a 12-person van for six passengers plus his family; someone else would drive his S.U.V., packed with eight. But the supplies overflowed the van. Someone was sent to pick up a trailer.

Father Solorzano finished Mass and came out to bless the pilgrims. He was also going to Washington, to concelebrate Mass with the pope. But he planned to go by plane.

He sprinkled holy water on the bowed heads. “Bless them O Lord,” he said, “as they begin

this journey.”

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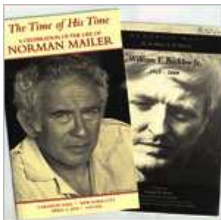
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