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THE POPE'S VISIT

'The Lord Wants Us Here,' Texas Pilgrims Say of Their Trip

By [RALPH BLUMENTHAL](#)

WASHINGTON — “The Lord provides,” Ricardo Pequeño kept reminding himself.

It was 2:30 a.m. Tuesday, nearly 42 hours after Mr. Pequeño, his wife, Maria, and their four sleepy children left Spring, Tex., on a pilgrimage to see [Pope Benedict XVI](#).

After singing hymns, saying the rosary and listening to a traveling companion discuss the mysteries of Jesus Christ, they were in their S.U.V. somewhere near Falls Church, Va., leading a dozen Texas neighbors in an accompanying van, hopelessly lost.

It was not the trip's first test of their faith, said Mr. Pequeño, a 44-year-old mechanic and follower of the Neocatechumenal Way, a back-to-early-Christianity movement, who had once waited 14 hours in a bus to catch a glimpse of [Pope John Paul II](#) passing through the airport in Monterrey, Mexico.

But he said: “This is not a vacation. This is not a pleasure trip. This is a pilgrimage, a trip of faith. We want our faith to be stronger. The Lord wants us here.”

Not that he had much chance of seeing the pope, Mr. Pequeño acknowledged. Only his son, Ricky, 17, had been given two tickets by their pastor to the papal Mass in Nationals Park on Thursday, and he had invited a friend, Stephanie Zazala. The rest of the family would try for glimpses on the street here and in New York, to which they planned to drive on Friday.

But as Ricky reminded the family, “You don't have to get close to the pope to have him touch you.”

Ricky credited prayer and his faith for helping him overcome a brush with the law over a gang affiliation and criminal mischief several years ago.

“What I hope to get out of this trip is an answer from God, what he wants from me,” he said.

“I've been hearing God's voice for some time,” he added. He had once thought of becoming a priest but was no longer so sure. Now he said, “It's up to me to open my ears.”

They had set a dawn departure Sunday only to find their belongings overflowing their two vehicles. A trailer materialized just in time, although Mr. Pequeño decided to stick with his own S.U.V. and let his friend, Pablo Del Castillo, a mechanic, pull the load with the van.

The van's air-conditioning balked, the vehicles guzzled gas, and the children required frequent bathroom breaks. The Pequeños' youngest child, 3-year-old Emily, grew tired and cranky. Andrea, their 11-year-old with dreams of becoming a teacher, admitted to boredom, she wrote in her diary, and gleefully tabulated the giant crosses she saw on Baptist churches.

They hit rain in Alabama, and fell short of their Sunday night goal, Chattanooga, Tenn., before having to bed down at 1 a.m. Monday in Gadsden, Ala., at a Motel 6, where they took four rooms, five to a room, at \$45 each.

And then, 1,670 miles after leaving Spring, approaching Washington well after midnight, they got lost.

Before leaving Texas, their traveling companion Walter Vente, a carpet installer, had been given the phone number of a member of the Neocatechumenal community in the Washington area, Charlie Wilkinson, and at 2:30 a.m. they called him.

Mr. Wilkinson, a social worker for the District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency, had been up late settling 42 other Texas pilgrims from Laredo and Dallas at St. Philip Catholic Church in Falls Church, Va.

He asked Mr. Pequeño where he was. The Texan did not know. But he read the street signs.

“Stay there,” Mr. Wilkinson said. He was there in 10 minutes, and guided the group to the church. Then, Mr. Pequeño said, he told them: “You have kids. I offer you my house overnight.”

He led them back to his row house in a modest development in nearby Annandale, Va. “The fridge is full,” Mr. Wilkinson said. “Take what you want.” Then he went back to the church.

Mr. Pequeño was overwhelmed. It reminded him, he said, of another family long ago provided for by God: “The Sacra Familia.”

“The Lord is opening the road for me,” he said.

His family and five other travelers spread their sleeping bags over the floor of the house. “I got the couch,” he said, laughing.

After a breakfast of tacos whipped up by Mrs. Pequeño in Mr. Wilkinson’s kitchen, the Pequeños debated what to do with the day. Pope Benedict was not arriving until 4 p.m.

“There’s the Capitol, the White House, the Lincoln Memorial,” Mr. Pequeño said, ticking off the possibilities. “The Smithsonian museums — they’re pretty good,” he said. “Oh, it’s free,” he remembered. “That’s our place.”

But before another member of the area’s Neocatechumenal community, Richard Shebora, could lead them to the subway for a trip to the Mall, they got a call from Mr. Wilkinson. All the Neocatechumenal visitors were gathering at 2 p.m. outside the Apostolic Nunciature, the [Vatican](#) Embassy in Washington, for a musical welcome to Pope Benedict, hours before his arrival.

Soon the Pequeños and their neighbors were playing guitars, dancing in an undulating circle and singing “Dayenu,” the Hebrew hymn of thanksgiving for Passover deliverance, a version of which has been adopted by some followers of early-Christian belief. Ricky was in the center on his African drum. “We do the original stuff, what the apostles did,” he said.

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