

The Man Americans Must See to Visit the Pope

By FATHER LEO McFADDEN

Vatican City — How does an American get into a papal audience?

To find out, I went to the priest in charge of the "audience office," the official agency in Rome established and supported by the American bishops to aid American tourists and pilgrim groups.

The priest is an American from the diocese of Sioux Falls, S.D., Father Richard J. Mahowald. He is a man who seems to enjoy his work, who loves to be in contact with people and who gets satisfaction out of helping tourists.

He is at the same time the superior of the graduate house of studies for American priests in Rome, a part-time teacher at the undergraduate North American College and a pursuer of a doctorate in philosophy "just to keep up a good reading program for myself."

The process of getting a ticket is simple enough. A letter should be sent in advance to Father Mahowald from a chancery office or even from a prospective pilgrim himself making the request.

"This part is crucial for us," he insisted. "We want to know when the party is arriving in Rome, the exact date and the time of day, the home address and zip code in the States and where they will be staying while in Rome."

The audience office will then send back a form letter to the people stateside, assuring them that their application has been received and giving them the contact point when they arrive in Rome.

Wednesday morning is the time for them to plan on for the audience in St. Peter's basilica and, that falling, to plan to be on hand at noon on Sunday for the papal blessing in the square of St. Peter's or the courtyard at the summer villa in Castel Gandolfo.

This advance notice to the officials in Rome is most important for the simple reason that the American office is sent only the number of tickets they request for a given audience, and no more. The entire voucher is submitted on the Friday before the Wednesday audience, so any "latecomers," those who have not requested in advance, are generally requested to present themselves personally to the Vatican distribution point to take their chances on available tickets.

If the pilgrims desire, the tickets will be sent to the major hotels in Rome.

"Besides," Father Mahowald said, "most of the people like to come here to get the tickets just to have them in their possession. I am glad to tell them what I know, help them arrange to get to the audience, suggest walking tours, or as simple a thing as where they can get a good meal. It is just a little thing, this easy conversation, but sometimes it means a lot to a person far from home."

There are several ways of getting to the audience, whether it is to be held at Castel Gandolfo, some 18 miles from Rome, or at the basilica of St. Peter's.

Peter's right in the city. For a few dollars arrangements can be made at the hotel for transportation. For the more adventuresome, the journey can be made in convenient public transportation.

I asked about the number of people who used the audience office. It amounts to tens of thousands each year, for we checked Father Mahowald's list for one week in August and found that over 700 people had procured tickets for that one Wednesday audience. This included a dozen groups traveling together, a small number for the office to handle, and about 115 separate requests for another 400 people.

The traffic is much more intense in early summer and around Easter when the student groups come flocking into Rome.

Wednesday is the only day that the Pope receives visitors in a general or semi-private audience, but a most colorful aspect of the papal public appearances occurs many times a year for the non-summer traveler. It just takes a note to the audience office to find out the dates of beatification or canonization ceremonies in St. Peter's.

"This is when the real meaning of the basilica comes alive," Father Mahowald said. "It is one thing to see St. Peter's as

a sort of museum, but it takes on a completely different beauty during a papal ceremony when it is suddenly transformed into a great hall of prayer. This is true also during Holy Week when almost every day the Pope is conducting one service or another and it is all open to the public. For many, just seeing the Pope as a priest at the altar is much more meaningful than seeing him in audience."

The semi-private audience seems to be given to two classes of people by the Vatican office which allots all tickets for any function. The sick, the infirm, or those with a terminal illness

comprise one group given special consideration. Special people who have come with a particular recommendation form the other class. "It is not generally known how much the office of the prefect in the Vatican tries to accommodate those who are not blessed with good health, but they go all out," Father Mahowald explained.

We have all heard many times that to both the devout and to the unbeliever there is something ethereal about seeing the Pope, something "otherworldly" about being lost in a crush of humanity but feeling quite near that man in white, or being caught up in the

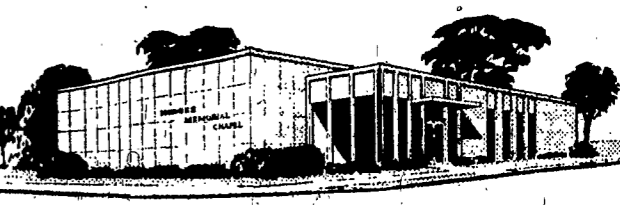
heraldry of it all, but seeing its serenity as well.

All of this is unsubstantiated, of course, but it begins to become a glimmer of truth in the office of the man who will get you there.

Father Richard Mahowald, superior, Casa Santa Maria; Via Dell Umilta 30 00187 Rome, Italy.

If you are a pilgrim, one ready to mix in with thousands of others from around the world, just write him before you leave the States, give him all the particulars and then go see him to collect your tickets.

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