

Unofficial preparation for the Pope's visit began with an unexpected phone call from the Papal Nuncio to Very Rev. David M. O'Connell, C.M. in late August 2007. As CUA's president recalls, the phone call began with these words: "Father O'Connell, I would like you to attend a meeting this Saturday here at the Nunciature. The Holy Father is coming to the United States and he would like to visit The Catholic University of America." With that brief statement, the university embarked on eight months of intense planning and preparation for one of the most thrilling days in the history of Catholic University.

Asked to explain why the Pope decided to come to Catholic University, Father O'Connell says, "Pope Benedict XVI chose to come to The Catholic University of America - to the Catholic Church's national institution of higher education -- to address Catholic university and college presidents and other Catholic educational leaders, one representative from each diocese in the United States."

April 17, 2008 was a momentous day for Catholic University. As Father O'Connell recalls, "The day arrived and the weather could not have been nicer. The students were "over the moon" with enthusiasm and excitement--- and so was I, quite frankly. Thousands of our students gathered outside the university center to await the Pope's arrival on campus. I was not nervous at all --- at least, until I saw the first police motorcycle pull into the driveway. I watched the long procession of law enforcement and security officials arrive. And, then, the president's black limousine with Vatican and American flags on each side, made its way slowly to the entrance of the university center. I could feel tears welling up inside as I saw the Holy Father through the darkened window. Then, as I rehearsed with the Vatican Protocol Office, the door opened --- my signal to approach the car. The Holy Father stepped out and smiled, waved enthusiastically to the students and then turned to me. "Hello, Father, how have you been?" he asked. I kissed his ring and held both his hands. "I cannot ever thank you enough for coming here," I said. Even now, I get emotional thinking about the moment. "This is a beautiful place," he responded, "and your students are so happy."

Following the papal address in the Pryzbyla Center, Father O'Connell escorted His Holiness to his famous Popemobile. Father O'Connell remembers those last moments with the Pope fondly, "I thanked him, we embraced and he turned, again, to the cheering students gathered outside. They all began singing the Regina Coeli and the Pope stopped the Popemobile, rolled down the window and waved goodbye. In a moment he was gone. It was a day I shall never forget and a responsibility that could never be equaled: hosting the Pope!"