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Bel Air cantor treasures memory of singing at papal Mass during Pope Francis' U.S. visit

When Pope Francis visited the United States in September, few had a better view than Bel Air resident Christina Massimei, who served as the cantor at the Canonization Mass for St. Junipero Serra at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C.

"It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience," Massimei said. "There aren't any words to describe the feeling. Going into it, there was so much preparation. Hours and hours of work. Coming out of it, it was surreal thinking that I was part of such a beautiful part of American history. I am very overjoyed and grateful to get that opportunity.

"When I first found out Pope Francis was coming to America, I figured there was no way I would be able to get tickets to the D.C. venue because I knew it would sell out, so I started making plans to get to Philadelphia on a Megabus, stay with friends and hopefully get a chance to see the Popemobile."

But she ended up doing a whole lot better.

The principal cantor at St. Stephen Parish in Harford County, Massimei has been singing at basilicas in the Baltimore and Washington metropolitan areas since arriving at Catholic University in the fall of 2007. She earned the opportunity to be the cantor for the papal Mass by acing an audition conducted by music director Thomas Stehle in July. The ticketed event at her alma mater drew 25,000 spectators and millions of viewers on national television.

"It was extremely intimidating," Massimei added. "It is always nerve-racking singing in front of that many people but I was so focused at the task at hand. I was so caught up in why the event was taking place. I don't want to say I didn't have a chance to get nervous because of course I did, but there was so much preparation going into it that by the time the event rolled around, I was pretty confident that I could do it."



Bel Air resident Christina Massimei cantors at the Canonization Mass for St. Junipero Serra at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C. on September 23, 2015.

Even though she was just 20 feet from Pope Francis, Massimei did not get a chance to meet the pontiff.

"I wasn't even able to shake his hand during 'Peace be with you,'" she said. "The security was extremely tight. I was given a specific parameter to where I was allowed to stand and was told if I moved out of it, it would become a security issue. So I didn't push it."

The 27-year-old got rave reviews for her performance and her ultimate goal is to sing professionally. Since the papal Mass, she has continued to cantor at both St. Stephen and St. Ignatius in Hickory and has performed several weddings.

"I was so overwhelmed by the support from both my churches," she said. "I got so many letters and cards and honestly I haven't even taken the cards down yet. They are on my dresser and every morning I look at them and smile. I am just honored to have gotten a chance to experience that with our religious leader. How many people can say they have done that? I was right there."

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