

Last week I shook the hand of Pope Francis. I had travelled to Rome for a meeting of the international Commission on English in the Liturgy, also known as ICEL. For the past 12 years I have assisted the bishops of this commission with translations and reports on their meetings once or twice a year. Normally they meet in Washington DC, but sometimes they go somewhere else around the world. Last week they met in Rome to mark the 50th anniversary of ICEL. During the Second Vatican Council, it became clear that the mass would change from Latin to vernacular languages. Poor nations, such as South Africa, did not all have people who could make translations or companies that could publish books. The English-speaking bishops decided to pool their resources and provide a uniform translation. Just two years ago their work on the mass was updated for the first time. Updates for the sacraments and other liturgical celebrations are underway.

Every Wednesday the pope holds a general audience at St. Peter's Basilica, and tens of thousands of people attend. The bishops of ICEL expected to have front seats at that audience last week. However, two days before the event, Pope Francis indicated he would welcome the commission to a private audience on Friday. Only 25 people were allowed to attend. Most of the bishops on the commission went, together with the staff members of the secretariat in Washington DC. Some of the staff are lay people, and they brought their spouses. I was invited because - I was in the right place at the right time.

We walked into Vatican City and into a room in the apostolic palace where the pope holds formal events such as this. Pope Francis entered and gave a brief address. He thanked the commission for its work and acknowledged the influence that the translation has had on the spiritual lives of the faithful. He concluded by offering us his apostolic blessing. We each then received the opportunity to greet the Holy Father individually. I only had a few seconds, and since Spanish is his first language, I used it when I spoke. I told him I was the pastor of St Anthony Church, and that all of us wished to share with him our love and our joy for his service. As we left the audience hall, we each received a rosary. I felt totally humbled in the presence of this great man, especially because he lives the message he preaches about caring for the poor.

Today's scriptures proclaim that same message. The Lord hears the cry of the poor. We owe the poor what we have - our resources, our influence, our time, and our faith. When we share with them, we experience the love of God - because we are with people to whom God especially listens. It is a rare experience to stand in the presence of the pope, but we can stand in God's presence whenever we help the poor.