

O

R

G

A

N

I

Z

E

D



**VISITATION RITES:** During his visit to Washington, D.C., Pope Benedict XVI was received at the White House, where he appeared with President Bush.



Meet the duo who got the blessing to orchestrate the Pope's U.S. visit.

R

E

L

I

G

I

O

N

| BY  
CHRISTOPHER DURSO





▲ **ADVANCE NOTICE:** A papal event is “not the kind of job where you can do a lot of preplanning,” according to Olivia Immerman. “People had the idea we were working two years ahead of time, but we really started the November prior to the April visit.”

**Sitting in the lobby of a Washington, D.C., hotel on a bright May morning, Eden Capuano and Olivia Immerman are relaxed, even contemplative. It’s a far cry from a month before, when their full-service event-planning firm, Voilà! Meeting & Event Management, handled the entire media component of Pope Benedict XVI’s first visit to the United States. \* For six days in April, when the Pope visited Washington, D.C., and New York City, Capuano and Immerman didn’t eat, rest, stop, or slow down. They were there when he said Mass at Nationals Park and Yankee Stadium, and when he presided over smaller Catholic groups and organizations in both cities. They were at the media centers they set up**

**How did your company end up with this job?**

**Olivia Immerman:** We started years ago with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), planning their deacons’ meetings and evangelical-type group meetings. USCCB got to know us pretty well. There was an extremely high level of trust. The Catholic Church tends to attract many opinions, no matter what the meeting is, and I think they thought Eden and I really handled things smoothly. Prior to the Pope’s visit being announced, the first step was that they needed assistance to find housing for the bishops that were coming, for the cardinals, for all the media. And we had to do all this without telling anybody what it was for.

**Eden Capuano:** About six months out — during springtime in D.C. and New York! Anyone in the industry recognizes the challenge of that: multiple rooms, 500-plus room nights, five nights in a row. But we said, “No problem at all. We’ll just let them know the Pope’s coming.” And they said, “No, you can’t let them know the Pope’s coming. Not until the Vatican announces it.” We called on our relationships and said, “Trust us. You want this piece of business. You will not be upset that whatever you had to do to make it happen, you did.”

**Immerman:** It started with housing and grew into handling all of the arrangements for the media.

**Capuano:** We had to do the credentialing, develop the design of the credential, and work directly with the Secret Service. Six-thousand-plus media were taken in, and we managed the whole process. We were responsible for all the media’s movements throughout the entire event.

**Immerman:** We had to do all the transportation — and coordinate with the hotels — in both cities for our credentialed media and the bishops. We had media from all over the world, broadcasting at all hours of the day and night, who had to be transported at all hours of the day and night.

**Capuano:** And manage that in conjunction with the Secret Service, which had to sweep the locations. There were times when we tried to conceptually grasp the enormity of this project, times

when we had to step away, catch our breath, and say, “Okay, we can do this. We just have to take this slowly, break it down.” We’ve been involved with heads-of-state events. But there’s just nothing that compares to this. The Secret Service talks about a papal visit like it’s the Super Bowl for them. The Pope is the “president of Catholicism.” There’s so much emotion and so much concern from a security side as to how to deal with this type of event. They [the Secret Service] are on the highest level of, almost, anxiety. They are in peak form. And we are constantly having to work under that umbrella, and if all of a sudden they decide “Nope, we’re closing that street” — that can throw an entire three hours out of whack.

**What was it like coordinating media on this scale?**

**Immerman:** It really was awesome to walk, in D.C. and New York, through the major media hotels. We had to set up the media center, the location for them to broadcast live. We had a live feed in from everything that was going on, so some print reporters who couldn’t get credentialed to go to a site could sit in the media



▲ **PASS COMPLETION:** Voilà! Meeting & Event Management arranged press credentials for thousands of reporters from around the world.

center, observe what was happening, and send their stories in. We had live broadcasts going out — a German broadcasting company, the Vatican radio, Sirius radio. They’re reaching out and touching the entire world, and it’s happening right here. And, oh, God, please don’t let the lights go out! [Laughs.]

**Capuano:** Another big piece of our responsibility was VAMP (the Vatican Accredited Media Personnel). This is a group of

at the official media hotel. They were on the media buses, moving thousands of reporters from site to site. And for months before that, they got by on a few hours of sleep a night as they arranged credentialing, lodging, and transportation for scores of reporters from around the world. \* Partners since 2001, when they launched the D.C.-based Voilà!, Capuano and Immerman have a casually professional rapport that suggests a relationship in which business and friendship have blended seamlessly. The two don't so much finish each other's thoughts as complement them, especially when they're discussing the logistics behind producing an event with such an intensely emotional component.



▲ **CENTER OF ATTENTION:** What was the biggest surprise for Eden Capuano in helping plan the Pope's visit? "That everything was live and the entire world was watching."

about 70 — primarily the Vatican's personal press corps, and they travel very closely with the Pope at all times.

**Immerman:** There was also a huge volunteer contingent, and we had to do their housing, manage them, feed them.

**Capuano:** We had to make sure on site that the volunteers had their media groups and were taking them to the appropriate destinations. We were responsible for creating what was called a "hangtag," or an overlay. Not only were they credentialed, they also then would have to receive a hangtag, which actually provided them access to that location.

**Immerman:** People ask us, "How long in advance did you start working on this?" But it's not the kind of job where you can do a lot of preplanning. People had the idea we were working two years ahead of time, but we really started the November prior to the April visit.



▲ **24 HOURS A DAY:** Media coverage of the Pope's visit was literally nonstop — with live broadcasts going out around the clock.

**Capuano:** We had staff for transportation, for credentialing, for the media center and housing. We made sure that we were pretty evenly covered. And then Olivia and I both had our specific areas that we were responsible for.

**Immerman:** Eden primarily took on the credentialing and the badging, and I took on the media center and the housing for both cities.

#### How much time did you actually spend with — or around — the Pope?

**Capuano:** There were no bended-knee and kiss-the-ring moments. [*Laughs.*] We could have chosen to be around him all the time at each of the programs.

**Immerman:** But we had so much going on, it was just impossible. We were at the big Masses at the stadiums, and then a couple of the smaller venues, which was exciting. But when you're trying to run a program, you tend to be constantly behind the scenes, making sure things are going right.

#### What was the most surprising part of the experience?

**Capuano:** That everything was live and the entire world was watching. To feel so exposed, and to know that media was able to blog, to write, to photo, to video everything that was happening at all times. That it was our responsibility to allow for them to provide the world coverage on something so enormous. Pope Benedict was outstanding. But to be constantly live, that made it impossible to close your eyes, impossible to sit down for something to eat, because all of that seemed so much less important in comparison to the kind of chaos going on.

**Immerman:** What really struck me was that everybody seemed to go into this visit with — I don't want to say negativity, but people were on their toes. There were huge security concerns. And it was just so awe-inspiring, just overwhelming to see, as each day progressed, it was like a wave of love that went through the crowds. People were crazy to see him, and it permeated all through the staff, through the Secret Service. It changed the whole flavor of everything that was going on. That level of anxiety [dissipated] as the days went by, because it was apparent that he was getting fabulously positive responses from the world. ■

► Christopher Durso is executive editor of *Convene*.