

• June 1984 •

A supplement to Catholic newspapers, published by the National Catholic News Service, 1312 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. All contents copyright © 1984 by NC News Service.

Faith Today

The pastor of the global parish

By Father Robert Sherry
NC News Service

In early May I departed from Washington, D.C., for Quito, Ecuador, to attend a conference of the Organization of Latin American Seminaries. Newspapers then were carrying front-page photos of Pope John Paul II's trip to Korea.

Bishops and priests from all but three nations of Central and South America participated in the Quito conference. Most traveled 2,000 miles or more to attend.

While there, I asked many persons why they thought the pope traveled so much. Bishop Hugo Polanco Brito of the Dominican Republic responded: "Because people want him to come. And he is coming to our country soon. That's all people are talking about. They can't believe that the pope will actually kiss the soil of our homeland. Hundreds of thousands will come to see the pope. The excitement is unbelievable."

"Why does the pope travel? Why not? Is he not the father of the Catholic family?" someone commented. "Like the pastor in a parish who will make house calls when asked, our Holy Father makes 'nation calls.'"

Yet another conference participant said: "I believe it is the pope's way of keeping in touch with the heart of the church.

When he puts the head of a small child between his hands and kisses the child's forehead, he is more pope than when he sits before the whole Curia," he added.

Pope Paul VI's journey to the United Nations in 1965 marked the first time in centuries that a pope made any kind of extended trip away from Rome. The pope once was known as "the prisoner of the Vatican." But the present pope is known as the traveler of the world, his global parish. He hopes to express the fact that he is "for others" by being "with others."

Between 1962 and 1972 12 Americans journeyed to the moon. James Irwin told what it was like: "I felt an overwhelming sense of the presence of God on



Why does the pope devote so much of his time to travel? What is his message in Africa, in Asia and Central America? The pope, writes Father Robert Sherry, shows he is for others by being with others. And he shows that we are all one family.

the moon."

Edgar Mitchell reported that on the way back from the moon, while contemplating the Earth from afar, he had a "peak experience, a religious experience, an explosion of awareness...what a religious person might call a revelation."

I sometimes wonder how the pope feels about his journeys. I

cannot help but think that seeing thousands of God's people lining the streets, cheering and singing, must be deeply moving — what I might call a religious experience.

The first time I spoke before a crowd of 5,000 persons was during a Freeport, Ill., high school graduation in 1969. The people had come to see their sons, daughters and friends graduate.

But for me it was a celebration of accomplishment for young people who had grown in wisdom, age and grace. I remember being awed and frightened. It was an exhausting, yet exhilarating experience — and memorable. Surely the pope sees and feels even more.

Why does the pope travel so much? A story from the comic strip, "Peanuts," comes to mind. Lucy says: "I love mankind; it's just people I can't stand."

It's quite the contrary for the pope. He intends to show love for human beings by being with them. In fact, he travels great, tiring distances, even risking assassination, to show it. The pope amazes me by his energy, fearlessness, enthusiasm and living spirit.

From the news accounts of his trips — from looking over the pope's shoulder, you might say — we have the advantage of seeing how the Good News has been carried to many corners of the universe. His travels fulfill a role by exposing people to this wider vision of the church, a global vision.

The pope helps people to see the vastness and diversity of our earthly family, how we have changed in complexion and custom, language and ritual. But still we are one family.

A newspaper I read recently carried a photo of Catholics from Enga Province in Papua New Guinea carrying a huge wooden cross to Mount Hagen where they would participate in a Mass with the pope. Looking at their faces and native dress, it took me a while to appreciate that these people too are my brothers and sisters in Christ.

The people in that photo appeared so "foreign." I've never seen a Sunday congregation dress or look like them. But, yes, they are part of my family in God. The pope's travels prompt me to see in all people the faces of my brothers and sisters.

(Father Sherry is director of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Priestly Formation.)