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Rochester Pilgrims Share 'Once in a Lifetime' Joy

By Terrance J. Brennan

Downsview, Ont. — Braving a nine-hour vigil in 50°F temperatures, 80 diocesan pilgrims cheered wildly at their first glimpse of Pope John Paul II as he toured the crowd of more than 500,000 people at the open-air Mass last Saturday in this Toronto suburb.

They came, many with cameras, hoping the Holy Father would pass close enough to their roped-off sections to provide the ultimate remembrance of what was, for many, a once in a lifetime experience.

And when it was over — when all the cameras stopped clicking, and all had returned to their buses safely — many were left struggling to put into words what they had just witnessed.

Libby Boslov of Brighton and St. Boniface Parish called it "indescribable," due mainly to the actual presence of the pontiff — "the fact that he's standing there. It's one thing to see him on TV, but there's something else to seeing the person."

"It was great and all, but there was something about it I just can't explain," fellow parishioner Louise Rodriguez said. "Just fantastic!"

Two Trailways tour buses, sponsored by the Courier-Journal with Grinnell Travel, left Rochester for Toronto early Friday morning and returned Sunday afternoon.

Charlie Macaluso of St. Theodore's, Gates, called Pope John Paul II "a beautiful man — far beyond being our pope."

"He's a very courageous man, very strong," said Jane Colligan of St. Patrick's, Victor. "I think along his lines and I support him."

Most of the group stayed in their hotel rooms Friday night to watch the Polish Rally from the Canadian National Exposition Stadium on television.

For the Downsview Mass on Saturday, thousands of tour buses were expected. To handle the large number, each bus was assigned to park in an industrial complex about five miles north of the airfield. From there shuttle service was provided via train. This left people with a walk of nearly a mile to the Mass site.

The Rochester buses were to be at their Downsview location by 8 a.m., with Mass scheduled at 4:30 p.m. Seating was totally dependent on each person. The option was there, of course, for the experienced pilgrims to bring their own lawn chairs and such. Those with less foresight found economy chairs (made out of cardboard) on sale for \$3 each, and metal deck chairs for \$18 each.

Many of the local group were impressed with the "front row" location of their seating area — it was the among the closest offered to the average pilgrim, yet still at least two football field-lengths from the altar.

Then came the wait — nearly nine hours — which was tedious for some but taken in stride as a whole. During the course, those gathered were entertained musically by a variety of youth groups ranging from choirs to steel drum bands. Other ethnic musical groups rode in large flat-bed trucks around the perimeter of the site.

"This is just what we expected," said Emanuel and Jean Bertola of St. Lawrence Parish, Greece. "We're glad we were a part of it."

"It was worth going through the hassle," said Janet Royka of St. Cecilia Parish, Irondequoit. "I enjoyed every moment."

Martha Balcerak felt compassion for those, especially the handicapped, who had to wait in the cold weather for trains back



The pontiff waves to the crowd in Canada.

Photo by Terrance J. Brennan

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