

WE ARE

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conference involving our diocesan group. The meeting was held at the Temple Events Center, located about 10 blocks from the downtown Radisson Hotel where I'm staying. My original plans were to go right back to the hotel and spend the evening typing, since I have to Federal Express two stories and a bunch of film back to Rochester in the morning. (No matter where I go, Monday deadlines at the newspaper are universal.)

But as made my way back to the Radisson, I realized how much I'd be missing out on by spending the rest of the night in solitude.

The true essence of World Youth Day is happening all over downtown. Denver will never see anything like this again, even if the Rockies win the World Series or the Broncos capture the Super Bowl.

Because in post-game celebrations for sporting events, people of all ages celebrate. Some of the locals get a little drunk. And start to tear up their town — and each other — a little bit.

Tonight, however, these sidewalks are filled almost exclusively with teenagers from foreign cities and countries. Their enthusiasm is a natural high and never gets destructive.

The song-singing from last night is still going strong, and I don't know if I've ever moved more than a few feet without one teen asking another, "Hi, where are you from?" Even those who can't speak English seem to understand that particular question.

The neatest part, I think, is these hordes of young people are treating total strangers like they belong to one big, happy family. For that matter, I guess many would be quick to point out that, as Catholics, they *are* all members of the same family.

At Celebration Plaza, a concert is being held near an area where various Christian organizations are passing out literature at small booths. I've never heard of a carnival for God, but that's what this scene reminds me of.

So I've chosen a small corner of this outdoor plaza to work tonight. Now that my tuna sub has been consumed, I'm banging merrily away on a laptop computer in about the noisiest conditions I've ever written under. And I — a person who normally insists upon silence with my deadline approaching — am loving every second of this.

Saturday, Aug. 14

Once again, I struggle to describe on paper the enormity of the day's occurrences.

On the roads leading to Cherry Creek State Park, traffic was backed up for miles — not with vehicles, but pedestrians. Although it's only mid-afternoon, preparation for an overnight vigil and tomorrow morning's closing Mass was well underway.

The diocesan group made a three-mile pilgrimage walk to get to Cherry Creek. At the entrance, we were all branded with stickers on our wrists that said "8-2" — the section we've been assigned to.

At the time it made me feel like we were a herd of cattle, but now that it's evening and there are about 200,000 people here, I realize that remembering the numbers "8-2" could save you a few hours of searching as you return from a concession stand or Port-a-Let.

Almost as soon as we arrived at the park, huge black clouds rolled in our direction — and we had absolutely no place to run for cover if the skies opened up. Everyone began covering themselves with raincoats and garbage-can liners, but somehow all we ever got was a sprinkle.

Darkness is now approaching and Pope John Paul II has arrived to conduct a vigil service before he returns tomorrow morning for his closing Mass.

Yet the Rochester people aren't experiencing the pontiff with the same electricity as two nights ago at Mile High. The pope is literally out of sight, on a stage maybe half a mile away; and the loudspeakers near us aren't functioning.

Some people are attempting to tune in the pope's talk on their radios, but most are content to just snuggle up in their sleeping bags and engage in low-key banter as they prepare for a long night under the stars.

I took this occasion to wander around and take some pictures. It was at this point that I had the most memorable conversation of a very memorable week.

Not far from Section 8-2 is a young man in a wheelchair, Frank Rocha of

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Bishop Clark (left) and Michael Thelsen, diocesan youth coordinator, hoist their group's banner.



Those who attended the Aug. 15 vigil were thrilled to get a close-up view of the pope.



Pope John Paul II gives a compassionate hug to 19-year-old Kathleen Friel of Houston, Tex., cerebral palsy, after she struggled up the altar steps in tears to greet him.



Lima's Jennifer Preston (left) and Jennifer Neill sing "We Are One Body" on Aug. 12.



The Aug. 14 vigil provided less-than-luxurious accommodations for these folks, hard at rest, didn't seem to mind.