

Pope enchants young people

The following are some notes I made about the experience of Pope John Paul II's visit to the church of St. Louis on Jan. 26 and 27.

- Even though he has been in the United States on several occasions, Pope John Paul's visit to St. Louis this week has drawn much national and local media attention. Several reporters were at the Rochester airport to ask me about the Holy Father. Fellow passengers expressed interest. Even as I write, the gentleman on the plane next to me is reading about the visit, which is the subject of the lead article in this morning's *USA Today*. I have this curiosity: How many conversations about this visit will take place in our country in the next couple of days? Where will the conversations lead people? What, if any, will be their long-term effect?

- A gratifying aspect of gatherings like this is the opportunity to spend time with brother bishops in informal, sometimes unexpected settings. For example, five of us had a good time chatting in the Pittsburgh airport — Ed Head of Buffalo, Jim Moynihan of Syracuse, Howard Hubbard of Albany and Bernie Schmitt of Wheeling-Charleston, W. Va. I seldom have a chance to visit with Bernie, and very much enjoyed the experience. Such moments will happen many times in the next 36 hours.

- Joseph Hill of R News is in the lobby when I arrive at the hotel, and there is a message to call Don Alhart of WOKR-TV 13. We are going to do our best to sit together, but all realize that in such crowds that can be a challenge.

- Kiel Center: Twenty thousand and more young people are here at 3:45 p.m. Most have been here since 9:30 a.m. Pope John Paul is due at 6:30 p.m. Seems like a long day to me, but the kids are full of life. Just now, Rebecca St. James, a young woman singer from Australia, has them on their feet, clapping in time with her music. I like the music, but my internal organs are vibrating with the volume. At the end of her set, the artist calls the young people to live chastely. The kids listen attentively. They applaud from time to time. Now comes an interesting rendition of "Adeste Fidelis." I never heard a rock version before. I like it.

- Father Stan Fortuna: "JP2, I'm with you!" he cries out, and the kids join him. Stan speaks of solidarity in the human family, our need for support and community. And he picks up on the theme of sacrifice, which the pope raised earlier today.

Stan does a play on the word family. F-A-M: Forget

along the way



By BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK

About Me. I-L-Y: I Love You. Stan moves from this to a rap session with the kids.

- The Christian rock group DC Talk follows Stan. The leader encourages the assembly, "Jesus is all right. I don't care what they say!" He notes the racial and ethnic diversity of his group and the assembly. "We are different colors because God is a very creative artist," he says.

The group really gets the house rocking with "Lean on Me." And the leader has some fun with the 200 or so of us bishops who sit close by the stage. He notes that we are dressed in cassocks and urges us to get on our feet and dance so he can show us in DC Talk's new video. We do. I doubt that he'll use it.

- One of the ushers just came by with a note from Arianne Michalek Aughey, who grew up in St. Andrew's Parish, Rochester, and went to Aquinas Institute. Arianne is in her last year at Washington University Law School. She very kindly searched me out and I am so happy that she did. Talk about being called and gifted! Arianne surely is.

- Steve Angrisano has the place rocking now. I think of our kids at home who have enjoyed Steve's talent and leadership at two of our youth conventions. He's singing, "Go make a difference; you can make a difference."

- The pope arrives at 6:30. Thunderous applause until 6:45 — and then more when Archbishop Rigali welcomes him to St. Louis. The pope responds with a quiet smile and measured gestures, and the kids love it. His gift of communicating over a distance is uncanny.

John Paul II leads us in prayer centered on a theme of the light who is Christ, and the light (and salt) we are called to be. Opening prayer: "Father you call your children to walk in the light of Christ..."

Three young people speak words of welcome on behalf of their peers and then a lively video presentation shows youths at prayer and in service. Readings, song and dance are done with grace and elegance by the teens.

The Holy Father speaks: "Your warmth and enthusiasm make me very happy. Tonight the pope belongs to you."

- We are at the Kiel Center, a sports arena. John Paul speaks of training for the spiritual life and, in making his point, mentions the success of Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa. Some excerpts from his talk that caught my ear:

"You train for a different goal — to follow Christ and bring him to the world. You belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to you."

"Youth is a marvelous gift of God ... You can not put off your meeting with Christ ... The time for action is now."

"Your training will never be finished. Christians are always in training — the pope also."

"In all my travels I tell the world about your youthful energies. That's fine. I think that's awesome."

"Everywhere I go, I challenge young people, as a friend, to live in the love and truth of Jesus Christ."

- In a moving passage, the pope speaks to the assembly about the darkness they may encounter in their journey to light — anxiety, fear, uncertainty. He includes even the harsh reality of suicide among the young. The kids are deeply attentive now — more so than at any other moment in this long celebration. They remain that way when the pope describes freedom not as the ability to do whatever we want, whenever we want to, but the ability to live out fully and honestly our relationships with God and with one another.

- The ceremony ends with a commissioning ceremony. The pope asks the kids — through a series of questions — if they are willing to accept Christ as the light of their lives. They respond, "We are."

He asks if they are willing to share that light as best they can, starting now. They respond, "We are."

As is his beautiful habit when he enters or leaves such an assembly, the pope offers special greetings to those who are ill. This is one of the aspects of his ministry I have always admired. At such times, he is clearly focused on each person. One senses in observing these encounters that they are very important to those who are infirm, and that they are equally significant to John Paul II.

More on the papal visit next week. Peace to all.

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