

Papal visits touch people in many ways

Last week I shared with you some memories and impressions of Pope John Paul II's meeting with youths during his visit to the Archdiocese of St. Louis. This week some additional reflections on the visit:

The second event to which we were invited was the Wednesday-morning Eucharistic Liturgy at the TWA Dome. It was beautifully done in every way. There was a real sense of peace and joy in the air that was most inspiring. The 80,000 people in the dome and the 20,000 gathered in the connected Convention Center clearly came to pray and to celebrate. They did so with great enthusiasm.

As I participated in the joy of the morning, I remembered other times when I had been privileged to be present with the Holy Father in large celebrations. St. Peter's Square on the night of his election in Rome in October of 1978; Shea Stadium; Yankee Stadium and Central Park in New York; Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles; Aqueduct Race track in Brooklyn; Grant Park in Chicago; Tabasco in Mexico. Every one has been memorable because each experience in its own way has taught me something about the church or ministry or the mystery of Christ alive among the people of God.

Before and after such events as the St. Louis visit, there is always speculation about the lasting impact of it all. Is the Holy Father seen as a world figure, media star or celebrity whose presence causes a passing excitement but who's forgotten when he leaves? Or do visits like this really change hearts or at least plant seeds that later will

along the way



BY BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK

flower in beautiful ways?

I certainly don't know the answer to those questions. My guess is that some who attended last Wednesday's event were deeply touched in significant and lasting ways. It may well be that others were not. That is no surprise. God's grace works in strange and unpredictable ways. We do not control it because we do not control God.

The question leads me to think of people and events that have had lasting impact in my life, especially those I experienced during my teen years. I think of teachers who encouraged, friends who supported, family members who understood.

Pius XII was the pope in my teen years. We were taught to respect him and pray for him. That we did. But in those days the pope did not leave the Vatican, and we certainly did not have the capacity of today's media to bring him into our living rooms.

Pope Paul VI changed the pattern that had led the pope to be considered a "prisoner of the Vatican," but it was John Paul II who changed the face of the papacy with his

travel. I believe a statement I just read: "Visiting the faithful worldwide, John Paul II has been seen in person by more people than any other man in history."

Presence is important; John Paul knows that. He also possesses rich gifts that let him touch people and move them. I think of his passion for the dignity of every person, his forthrightness, his love for the young, his care for the infirm. These and other qualities and commitments have given him a clear worldwide profile. Whatever the number of his years, he will not be soon forgotten.

If we all live to experience a new pontificate, it will be interesting to note the way in which Pope John Paul's successor approaches the demands of his pastoral office. I cannot imagine him remaining in the Vatican like Pope Pius XII. It is equally hard for me to imagine any successor adopting the scope and depth of John Paul II's travel patterns. I say that not just because I've met few people who have the stamina for such rigors. I say it also because such an approach to ministry demands — besides stamina — a wide range of gifts not everyone possesses.

A new Bishop of Rome will be a different person with own story, gifts and pastoral approach. We will pray for him and support him wherever he goes and in all of his ministry just as we support John Paul II. And, in so doing, we'll be grateful for the ministry of Peter among us — a ministry that tends to the bonds of faith and charity that mark us as followers of Christ.

Peace to all.

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