

FEATURE

Papal cultural center opens in nation's capital

WASHINGTON (CNS) — People from across the country and around the world came to Washington for the March 22 opening of the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, paid for by \$60-million in private donations.

"I'm overwhelmed and excited. It's going to take many visits to see everything. I think visitors will come back again to see and do everything there is to offer," said Dorothy Carson of St. Cunagunda Parish in Detroit. Many left saying they were enthused and excited about the spiritual journey and high-tech fun they experienced.

Most distinctive about the center are its architectural features — a soaring copper roof resembling angel's wings, a 75-foot-high gilded cross and a reflecting pool located on the front terrace, calling to mind the importance of water in Catholicism.

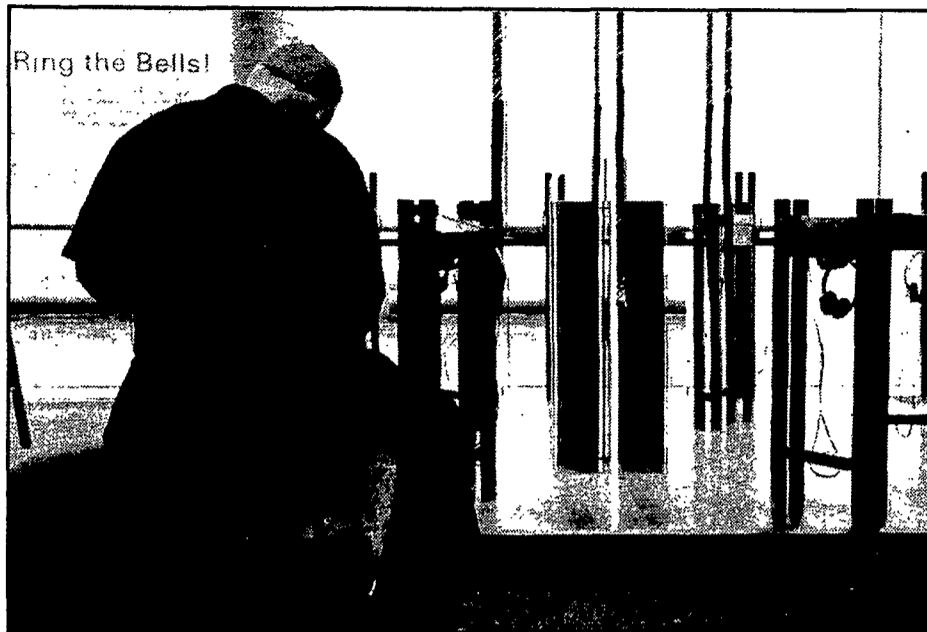
Built of limestone, granite, copper and glass on a 12-acre site across from The Catholic University of America, the cultural center showcases art treasures from the Vatican and a collection of personal memorabilia belonging to Pope John Paul II, including his skis, one of his rosaries and family photos.

"At the heart of our mission here is the intellectual and moral faith formation of believers and an ongoing invitation to non-believers," said Cardinal Adam J. Maida of Detroit, who was appointed by the pope to be president of the cultural center.

Cardinal Maida was the driving force behind the cultural center, which he originally envisioned as a sort of papal equivalent to presidential libraries. Its content has been expanded to incorporate exhibits about the history of Catholicism and other religions, art exhibits and ways for visitors to leave testimonials about faith, hope and service. Cardinal Maida told an audience at the grand opening that the pope insisted it be located in Washington instead of any of several other suggested sites, including Warsaw or Krakow in Poland.

"He sees Washington, D.C., as the crossroads of the world," Cardinal Maida said. More than a museum, the center offers visitors hands-on experiences. They can touch a bronze cast of the Holy Father's hand, ring church bells, create stained-glass art, ask questions about Catholic teachings, and learn about the saints.

After entering the center, visitors catch



Nancy Wiehac/CNS

Washington Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick finds a place to reflect before the grand opening of the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington March 22. He was sitting near an interactive exhibit that allows visitors to ring a set of electronic church bells.

their first glimpse of faith from a global perspective in the Gallery of Mary, which features an exhibit of colorful panels and text with images of Mary as she is seen and depicted in cultures around the world.

The first art exhibition on loan from the Vatican Museums is "The Mother of God: Art Celebrates Mary," which spans the 2,000-year history of the church in virtually every type of art. Valued at approximately \$3.5 million, the 38 pieces will remain on exhibit through June 2002.

Father Michael Bugarin, director, said he thinks the center will give visitors an opportunity "to reflect on their faith and how it will make an impact on their own family life and society at large."

The evangelization process began even before the center opened, he said.

"When I look at the Hands of Peace exhibit, I recall how the artist who began the project as an agnostic finished the job talking about his faith conversion. In the process of interviewing the people for the exhibit, he became a believer and will be baptized and confirmed this Easter."

The Omaha-based firm of Leo A. Daly designed the exterior of the building, with

the New York firm of Edwin Schlossberg creating the interactive computer exhibits.

"There are over 80 different software programs and more than 18 hours of films," said Schlossberg. "The idea is to provide a really astonishing experience."

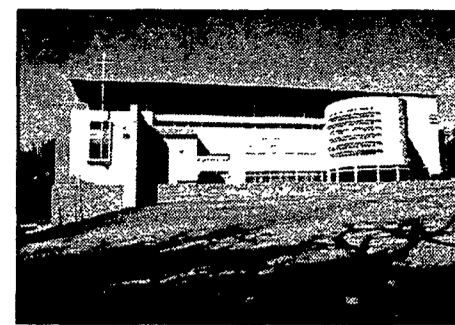
His wife, Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg, brought the couple's three children to the cultural center. "It's fantastic. It's even better than I thought it would be. It's great for the kids, too," she said.

Visitors use a key-coded access card to gain entry into the interactive exhibits.

"At the testimonial stations, people can participate by drawing or using the audio or video equipment so they can share their feelings with others, and hopefully open up a dialogue about faith, which is not a topic generally discussed in this country," said Penelope Fletcher, deputy director and chief operating officer of the center.

The interactive stations also allow visitors to ask questions about Catholic teaching from abortion to Scripture.

"My daughter liked being able to ask questions because I think there are a lot of things kids don't know about and they can ask questions and learn more, like what is



The new Pope John Paul II Cultural Center sits on a 12-acre parcel adjacent to The Catholic University of America and the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.

heaven and what is hell?" said Ronald Marino, a member of San Francesco Parish in Clinton Township, Mich. "Young people haven't had anything to center on and now they have something to see and relate to the religion."

Said Sarah Walkowiak of Houston, "You actually get to participate. It's not just reading. You get to do and learn. People picture us Catholics as boring, and this is not boring. This is fun." The building also includes a small chapel, a cafe, theaters and an academic forum. The top floor will host 12 scholars, who will study the application and impact of papal teachings.

Victoria Murphy of Long Island, called the center "a dream come true" and said it "will be ever evolving, just as the Smithsonian" and other major museums.

"We will be able to tell our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren to keep coming here and learning about the Catholic faith," she added.

The center's directors say the new museum can accommodate 1,500 visitors a day; they hope to draw 500,000 people a year. It is open Tuesday through Sunday, and only on Mondays which are holidays. Admission is \$8, with a discounted rate of \$6 for senior citizens. Children under age 3 are admitted free.

The center is about 1-2 mile north of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. It is at 3900 Harvard Road, NE, Washington, DC 20017; 202/319-4100. Its Web site is www.jp2culturalcenter.org.

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