



Arturo Mari/CNS

Youths from five continents gather at Strawberry Island in Ontario for a private lunch with Pope John Paul II July 26. The youths, dressed in native costumes, offered gifts from their countries to the pontiff and performed traditional dances.

## Pilgrims chosen to dine with the pope

By Karen M. Franz  
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Just seeing a close-up of Pope John Paul II on the "jumbotron" television screens brought many World Youth Day pilgrims to the verge of tears. But 14 young pilgrims from 12 nations got a much more personal look at the 82-year-old pontiff, and the experience left them awed and honored.

The 14 pilgrims were invited to have lunch with the pope Friday, July 26, at Strawberry Island, the Basilian retreat center in Lake Simcoe, north of Toronto. According to Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, WYD national director, the event was the Holy Father's idea. In preparation for WYD 2000 in Rome, the pope had asked the priests and people of the Rome diocese to take in pilgrims from around the world, Father Rosica noted, and decided to do so himself at his summer residence of Castel Gandolfo.

The pope so enjoyed his contact with the young people that he wanted to recreate something of that experience in Toronto by inviting a small group to have lunch with him at Strawberry Island, Father Rosica said. Accompanying the 14 pilgrims were Father Rosica, Vatican press spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls and Archbishop Anthony G. Meagher of Kingston, Ontario, chairman of the Canadian bishops' organizing committee for World Youth Day.

Most of the pilgrims were chosen by the bishops' conferences in their respective nations, which, in turn, had been selected to emphasize the world's struggling nations. Eleven of the lucky lunch guests hailed from Germany, India, Sudan, China, Kenya, Australia, Peru, Jordan, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Tahiti. Three Canadians, representing different segments of the WYD host nation's population, were included on the guest list, plus Bronx-native Robin Cammarota, who had witnessed the attacks on the World Trade Center.

Navarro-Valls said the pope was very interested in Archbishop Meagher's description of the "the profoundly pastoral work taking place in Toronto," including confessions in several languages. The pope listed the years and locations of all

previous WYDs and asked which of his young guests had attended the greatest number of youth days. "He was clear and full of memories," Navarro-Valls said.

Archbishop Meagher told reporters that he had "watched friends who are parents and grandparents interacting with the children they love — it was very much the same interaction between these young people and the Holy Father."

Lunch guest Anneke Pehmöhler of Wahlstedt, Germany, agreed, saying that the pope "is a normal person. He's an old man, like a grandfather."

Pehmöhler, 20, said she told the pope that she was excited to meet him and that she was looking forward to seeing him again at the next World Youth Day, which is scheduled to take place in Cologne, Germany, in 2005.

When the group first saw the Holy Father, he was sitting outside on the porch, she said. "He was so close to me; it was a big honor." Pehmöhler said the Holy Father was very nice and "paid attention to everyone. He was happy to be on Strawberry Island," which she described as very nice.

A worker in the WYD 2002 Toronto office since January, Pehmöhler first learned that she would attend the luncheon three to four weeks ago. One day, Father Rosica asked her, "What are you doing on the Friday of World Youth Day?" She said she didn't know yet, and Father Rosica replied, "Well, then you're going to have lunch with the pope."

The Holy Father asked her to sing the German Christmas carol "Stille Nacht" ("Silent Night"), which she said she did quietly. She gave the pope a prism, a reference to part of the WYD theme "You are the light of the world" and said she hoped he could keep it on his desk.

According to Robin Cammarota, the pope's lunch guests also sang "Let It Be" by the Beatles and "Country Roads" by John Denver because most members of the group knew those songs.

Cammarota, a Hunter College student who also works for the Archdiocese of New York, said she was one of the first members of the group to learn, back in February, that she had been selected to have lunch with the pope. "I feel so blessed to be the one chosen to represent

New York City and the U.S. It was such a great experience," she said.

The Holy Father asked Cammarota if she had been in Manhattan at the time of the attacks, and she told him that she had been trapped in the city for several hours and knew several people who died.

Her parish, St. Francis de Chantal in the Bronx, lost five people in the Trade Center attack. Yet, Cammarota said, "I actually knew more people who survived by missing the train" or otherwise running late for work that morning. "I've often said the guardian angels were working overtime that day."

Cammarota, who said she had attended daily memorial Masses conducted in the New York Archdiocese following the Sept. 11 attacks, told reporters that she was impressed by the faith that grew from them. "Almost a year later, we're definitely stronger now," she said.

Nineteen-year-old Cammarota also told the pope she shared his birthday of May 18. "I think he is a great man and very influential. He's so powerful," she said.

Asked by a secular press reporter how she feels about the pope being "against reform" in the church, Cammarota remarked, "Although he is against reform, he keeps a very strong church alive."

Cammarota presented the pope with a gift of a U.S. flag signed by her WYD delegation and a New York Catholic Youth Organization jacket.

She said she and the other lunch guests had been instructed not to call the Holy Father "Pope" and to avoid slang, which



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Australian Cliffon John William Mamid tells reporters about the lunch.



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Anneke Pehmöhler hopes to see the pope again at World Youth Day 2005.

she joked might have been a reference to her Bronx background.

Cliffon John William Mamid, a 17-year-old aboriginal of Australia's Yarru people, said his "heart was beating, full of butterflies" at the luncheon. "I was thinking of things to say just to be part of the conversation," he said.

Mamid, who is studying to be a chef specializing in pastries, pronounced the meal — cooked by Rochester's Helen Lopuchowycz — "good, but a bit cold" by the time they started eating. The papal party had salad, pasta and cake for lunch.

He said the young guests went around the table, telling the Holy Father what they thought about World Youth Day and why they had come. He showed reporters a rosary and World Youth Day medallion he had received as gifts from the pope, and said he was finally calming down after the 20-minute boat ride back from Strawberry Island to the pier at Marina Del Rey, about a two-hour drive from downtown Toronto.

He said he would tell fellow members of the Australian delegation that lunch "was great and there is nothing more exciting than meeting the pope."

## WYD welcome sign embraced many countries, religions

The press area at Downsview Park during World Youth Day had a distinctly welcoming atmosphere — in fact, it found 106 different ways to say "Welcome."

That's the number of languages in which the word was written on a 25-by-15-foot needlepoint tapestry hanging from a press room wall.

The colorful display was created over a two-year period by Vahid Saadati of Brampton, Ontario, Canada. He said his creation will be submitted to the Guinness Book of World Records.

Saadati emphasized that the project was geared to embrace many religions as well

as many countries. "The people who helped on this are Christians, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhists, Hindus," he said.

An Iranian native who is Muslim, Saadati said that World Youth Day has deep meaning "not just for the Catholic faith. It's to bring the world together; the Holy Father is a strong figure for peace."

In regard to the Al Qaeda terrorist network that claims to represent Muslims, Saadati commented, "These crazy people — they not only hijacked planes, they hijacked a faith. I'm hoping the world will come together and say enough is enough."

—Mike Latona