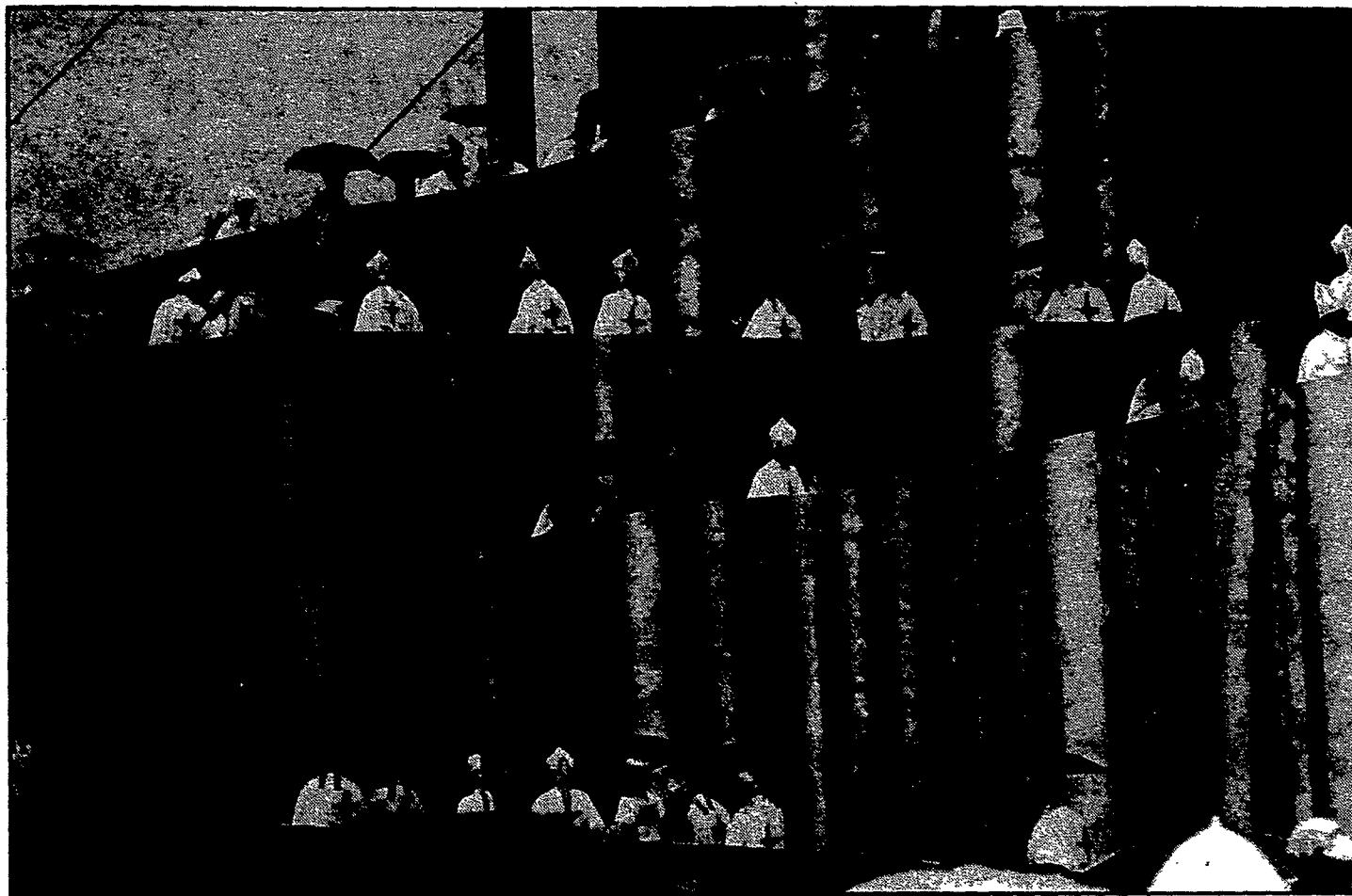


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Umbrella-clutching bishops walk up a ramp to the stage before the pope arrives for Sunday morning Mass at Downsview Park July 28.



Peter VanLieshout (left), 15, and Dan Donohue, 16, of St. Joseph's Parish in Livonia sing to pass the time on their bus ride back from Toronto Sunday evening.

tions section. Numerous booths promote religious orders of men and women, along with lay missionary groups. To one side of the room, presentations are being offered on various vocational themes, including the vocation of marriage.

It crosses my mind that Father Rosica, while planning World Youth Day, emphasized repeatedly that there would be a strong focus on vocations. Not only has this held true, but I've also noticed a large number of young-adult priests and nuns this week — not only at exhibition booths, but walking all over Exhibition Place.

Informational literature at the booths is disappearing at a healthy rate — and, unlike some anti-Catholic brochures making their way around Toronto this week, young people are coming forward for the info rather than having it pushed in their faces.

Back outdoors, I find merchandise booths doing a healthy trade and concerts on stages all over the complex. As one might imagine, items are piling up by now at the lost-and-found booth. There are many security guards and volunteers on the grounds, which is good because lots of people have questions. Sometimes great frustration emerges due to language barriers, or because officials can't solve the problem.

I'm noticing more and more people taking naps on the ground. After several minutes' wait I cram into a trolley with numerous pilgrims and even a baby in a carriage. The pilgrims are clearly hot and tired; adrenaline can only carry you so far before you crash.

Large groups are forming human chains, lest they get separated if they don't all fit in the trolley — and God knows how long it might take to reconnect.

It makes you wonder, seeing so many unhappy faces: Why would people give up so much time and expense, and in many cases travel thousands of miles, for this?

My answer arrives a few hours later. University Avenue is packed for a three-hour Way of the Cross, otherwise known as Living Stations — the only WYD event to take place in downtown Toronto this week. This depiction of Jesus' passion is easily the most elaborate of its kind I've ever seen.

Whereas other activities thus far have been basically high-octane, the Way of the Cross evokes silent reflection as it processes down University. During the 12th station, when Jesus dies on the cross, many young people are openly weeping.

This scene reminds me of the true nature of pilgrimages — they're more than cheering for the pope and chatting with folks from foreign lands. Pilgrims willingly accept sweat, suffering and other sacrifices, because they know that Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice.

July 27: Long day's journey

I pop over to Downsview Park early in the morning. Located just north of Toronto, this former military base is the size of several football fields. People are already arriving in bunches to get good seating for the pope's vigil service tonight. In the distance looms a large stage, with a gigantic

golden cross suspended over it, where Pope John Paul will preside at the vigil and at tomorrow's Mass.

It's now 11 a.m. and already at least 80 degrees outside. This brings me back to the final day of WYD '93 in Denver, where people were fainting right and left. I'll keep my fingers crossed for today.

I get back to the park in mid-afternoon but sure enough, bottled water is in huge demand while the medical staff is hustling hard. Guess I should have said a prayer instead of just crossing my fingers.

But there's good news, too. Rochester's pilgrims are situated well within view of the stage and definitely among the better seats. Credit DeJesus and Michael Theisen, diocesan director of youth ministry, who staked out the site early this morning.

By now, the young-adult crew has successfully met up with the diocesan weekend pilgrims. Though World Youth Day is primarily an event for young adults, the Rochester Diocese is heavily represented by high-schoolers for the two-day pilgrimage.

The diocesan area is flooded with sleeping bags as pilgrims prepare for the vigil, a night's sleep on the ground (or maybe an hour's sleep, given the conditions) and Mass in the morning. Rochester's turf is marked by a makeshift flag: a bunch of pink streamers, with a pink flamingo (not a real one) perched on top.

When the weekend pilgrims reached Toronto earlier today, they parked in the general vicinity of Downsview Park and went on pilgrimage walks of roughly three miles each into the park. Meanwhile, about half of the 30 weeklong pilgrims decided to take a six-mile hike.

Ashley Perez of Good Shepherd Parish in Henrietta reports that her group prayed the rosary during its walk. Also on a prayerful note, she adds, last night some of the young-adult group attended Way of the Cross while others stayed behind and observed their own Stations of the Cross.

Right now Ashley and some of her fellow six-mile hikers are feeling the effects of today's journey. "We were constantly drinking water and the sweat was falling right off of us," says Ladlene Rasquinha, of St. Anne Parish in Rochester.

"It was pretty bad. We threw our stuff down (at Downsview) and laid down," adds Kim Reed, of Henrietta's Good Shepherd.

However, the tired pilgrims are beneficiaries of some soothing back rubs by Frank Engle, a young-adult pilgrim from Greece's Holy Name of Jesus Parish.

"Frank's been giving great massages," Ashley comments.

Engle says, however, that foot massages

are out of the question: "I have to draw the line somewhere."

Early this evening, the pilgrims enjoy the main reason they came to Toronto: the pope's helicopter descends upon Downsview. Young people pile forward, and in some cases are hoisted on each other's shoulders, as they strain to get a glimpse of the pontiff when his popemobile goes by. Many walk away weeping.

The crowd is estimated to be between 500,000 and 550,000. And to think this scene will be repeated in the morning, with even more people: the vigil is for WYD pilgrims only, but the pontiff's closing Mass will be open to the public.

July 28: Wet but wonderful

As if the exhausted pilgrims haven't already endured enough this week, a soaking rain at dawn starts the day. It stops briefly and then comes down in buckets for several minutes before the 9:30 a.m. Mass: heat exhaustion one day, shivers the next.

There's some thunder and lightning mixed in, too, which makes me wonder: athletic contests and other events are halted when lightning is near — but where do you tell 800,000 to run for cover?

I'm only 50 feet from the diocesan group, but am separated by a roadway being kept clear for the pope's arrival and cannot cross. But I get within a few feet of the popemobile as it passes by, transforming the drab mood into instant excitement.

I then huddle under a platform with Anton Ziegler, 9, who came from Mississauga for Mass today with his stepfather, John Lasic. Anton had climbed atop the platform and gotten a straight-on view of the pope.

"I think he looked at me," Anton reports. "It made me kind of nervous — the most important man in the world looked at me, this scrawny little boy."

A howling wind turns the scene into a mini-hurricane as Mass begins. "Uh, I've already showered this morning," a woman mutters as she gets hit by a stream of water sliding off an umbrella. "We've been blessed!" one guy exclaims, touching off a round of laughter.

Finally the sun appears, right as the pope's homily begins. Soon afterward, I have my most powerful experience of the week, which I'll get to in a moment. By the time Mass ends I have reunited with the diocesan folks, and soon they're beginning the long walk back to their buses.

Mass-goers shuffle out of the park in droves, stepping around mud, ruined sleeping bags and pillows, uneaten food, and all other kinds of trash. To think the city's garbage collectors were on strike until only a couple of weeks ago... well, this should help them make up for the work time they lost.

Whereas I'm sure this scene will make for good photo coverage, a la Woodstock, my most enduring memory of World Youth Day 2002 will not be of the messes and the inconveniences. For that matter, it won't even be of the pope's appearances.

Even though I had taken in many sights and sounds this past week, maybe I was too busy to stop and feel what World Youth Day is all about. Thankfully, the sign of peace took care of that. Away from the diocesan group and fellow media, I found myself greeting pilgrims who had come from far, far away to celebrate their faith together.

This was a major uplift in the aftermath of September 11 and the sexual-abuse priest crisis in the Catholic Church. WYD organizers wondered whether terrorist threats would severely limit attendance at their event. More recently, major media have asked often if the Catholic faith will survive the sex scandal. I'd say 800,000 folks for the closing Mass is a pretty good response to all these concerns.

When people smile and say the word "peace" in all kinds of languages, even hugging and kissing perfect strangers, and you see the love in their eyes despite their fatigue and other discomforts — well, that's the Catholic Church at its best.

It's exactly, I'm sure, what our wise pope had in mind 17 years ago when he began this whole thing.