

WYD director recalls pope's visit

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

ROCHESTER — The numbers say it all.

Attendance: 250,000 the first day, well over 800,000 for the closing Mass five days later. Communion wafers: 4,000,000. Portable toilets: 10,000. Entertainers: 5,000, from 160 countries. Volunteers: 25,000. Journalists: 4,200. Bishops: 600. Priests available in designated confession areas: 1,000. Visitors to a vocations pavilion: 50,000 per day.

Popes: 1.

It was indeed the tiniest number that fueled the much larger ones, observed Basilian Father Thomas Rosica. The Rochester native, who served as director of World Youth Day 2002 in Toronto, revealed these statistics during a dinner lecture Oct. 27 at the University of Rochester's Interfaith Center.

He said the appearance of Pope John Paul II made the intense preparation all worthwhile, stating, "The pope was the easiest part of World Youth Day. Everybody doubted if he was going to come, but I never doubted it."

Father Rosica, a Toronto resident, spoke to a group of mostly college-age Catholics, including several who had attended World Youth Day July 22-28 with a contingent from UR. He then concelebrated the weekly 7 p.m. Mass with Father Brian Cool, the university's Catholic chaplain.

Father Rosica shared some first-hand, behind-the-scenes observations of the 82-year-old pontiff during his short stay in Canada:

- Upon arriving in Toronto, the pope scrambled security and flight plans by insisting that his helicopter fly over Exhibition Place — rather than go directly to his temporary residence, Strawberry Island — because he wanted to see the masses of young people gathered below.

- While staying at Strawberry Island, several miles north of Toronto,



Bill Wittman/CNS

Basilian Father Thomas Rosica spoke at the University of Rochester's Interfaith Center Oct. 27 about his experiences as director of World Youth Day 2002. In this photo from June, he meets with the WYD organizing team.

the pope turned a planned 30-minute boat ride into a 2 1/2-hour venture after encountering residents of a hospital for children with severe disabilities. The pope threw rosaries to them as they surrounded him in their paddle boats.

- For his Friday luncheon, he requested 14 young-adult guests from parts of the world marked by strife, such as Bosnia, China and New York City. During the gathering he asked the group to sing, and they sailed into hits by Simon and Garfunkel and the Beatles while he kept rhythm by tapping his hand.

- As he was being flown to the airport for his departure on July 29, the pope looked down upon Downsview Park and saw heaps of garbage resulting from the hundreds of thousands of people — including approximately 1,000 pilgrims from the Diocese of Rochester — who had attended his Mass there one day earlier.

er. "He said 'Good luck,'" Father Rosica recalled.

- The pope learned that the young man who portrayed Christ in a Friday-night Stations of the Cross — held on the streets of downtown



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Toronto and viewed worldwide by approximately 1 billion people — would be among the people seeing him off at the airport. According to Father Rosica, the pontiff quipped, "Jesus will say goodbye to me?"

Father Rosica said these moments reflected a sharp wit and, more importantly, a love for young people that goes beyond words.

"There's something about him that blows your mind. It's truly an incredible thing to see it up close," Father Rosica said.

He added that the pope's journey to Toronto couldn't have come at a better time, having occurred less than a year after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"The world needed this event at this point. The church needed it," Father Rosica emphasized. "If ever there was a time the world needed to hear the message of the Gospel, it was then."

World Youth Day was begun by Pope John Paul in the mid-1980s. In addition to an international gathering every two or three years, the pope called for a special annual acknowledgement of young people known as World Youth Sunday. Coincidentally, Father Rosica's visit to UR fell on that day.

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