

Behind the Scenes of the Papal Visit

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(April 15, 2008) A man who was accidentally impaled by a tree on a Missouri farm considers it a miracle to be attending the Papal Mass at Nationals Park in Washington, DC. The Yankees are worried about the crowd stepping on the grass at Yankee Stadium and a group of Catholic school children hope their German will sound alright when they sing Happy Birthday to the Pope on April 16.

Some of the most interesting news about the Papal visit will probably take place off-camera during this historic papal visit.

We can hardly imagine the excitement of those school children from Annunciation Catholic School in Washington DC who have been brushing up on their German in order to sing for the Pope on Wednesday morning.

“They’re tickled pink,” said Kathy Dempsey, a spokeswoman for the Archdiocese of Washington. The Pope is beyond celebrity status for these children, she said. “Not to say that celebrities don’t have substance, but the pope is all about substance and he represents God’s love . . . And the young people, they get that,” she said.

Another 175 children in grades four through eight will sing for the Pope during the 10:00 a.m. Mass at Nationals Park the following morning. They were all chosen at random from among 400 names that were submitted by parishes from all over the Washington Archdiocese. It will be quite a debut for the children who will sing before a crowd of approximately 46,000 people and 300 priests.

But they won’t be alone. They will be joined by an 80 voice gospel choir and a 65 voice intercultural choir that will perform in French, Zulu and Spanish.

One of those choir members, Camille Frezzo, was pregnant with her daughter when she stood outside the Cathedral of St. Matthew in Washington waiting to catch a glimpse of Pope John Paul II.

"I remember thinking, she's been blessed, even before she was born," she told the *Catholic Standard*, the newspaper of the Washington Archdiocese.

On April 17, both Camille and her husband, Ronald, will join the 248 other singers at Nationals Park.

Another student, 22 year old Peter Osgood, won the privilege of being personally introduced to the Pope after winning an essay contest at the Catholic University of American. Osgood wrote a 500 word essay about "How Catholic Education Has Changed My Life" which detailed his experience in both a Catholic elementary school and a public high school. He chose to go back to

the Catholic style of learning.

“I felt like I wanted to have that faith integrated in my learning so that I could be a person who really stood for something.”

After finding out that he won, he told reporters at *Channel 8 News*, “I’m still really overwhelmed, like my heart hasn’t stopped pounding.” Meeting the Pope was now no longer a dream.

”To have the opportunity to meet him, just seemed like one of those opportunities you’d never have again . . .” he said.

Jack Weir from Missouri feels the same way, but for an entirely different reason. On May 20, 2007, he was driving a piece of heavy equipment on his farm when he passed a statue of the Blessed Mother. He stopped to make the sign of the Cross and say a short prayer. Minutes later, he drove into an excavated hole to remove a cottonwood tree when a large branch, about five to seven inches in diameter, broke off and drove straight through his body, impaling him to the seat.

Luckily, he was able to reach the cellphone in his pocket and called his wife for help. While waiting for emergency crew to arrive, he tried to remove the branch by backing up the vehicle but it didn’t work. Rescue workers used a stretcher and a golf cart to get him out of the hole and transported him to the hospital with a portion of the branch still stuck in his abdomen.

After five surgeries and ten days spent in a medically induced coma, Weir was back to work by June 6, and is looking forward to traveling to Washington for the Mass in Nationals Park.

He believes that pause for prayer on the day of the accident is why he’s able to make the trip.

“I’ve always believed in the power of prayer,” he told the Washington Archdiocese. “This opportunity means everything to me. It is only by the grace of God that I’m verticle and on this side of the grass. Being at this Mass is a way I can express my gratitude to God that I have more time to spend with my grandchildren.”

Security is another part of the story that will not always remain behind the scenes during the Papal visit. This is particularly true when the Pope arrives in the city of Ground Zero.

Wherever he goes in New York, there will be bomb-sniffing dogs in the crowd, snipers on rooftops, scuba divers in the harbor and police helicopters hovering overhead.

“The closer you get to those locations, the more you are going to feel the effects of it,” New York Police Department Commissioner Ray Kelly told *CBS News*.

Streets are expected to be clogged wherever the Pope is visiting, such as the United Nations, the East Park Synagogue and St. Joseph’s Church. A “frozen zone” will be established around St. Patrick’s Cathedral where no one can enter without a ticket and a security check.

“Many of these measures have become part and parcel of our protection of New York since Sept. 11,” Kelly said. “While we are not aware of any specific threats to the pope during his visit, we are obviously cognizant of the fact that Osama bin Laden in his latest video was critical of the pope.”

Security will also be tight when the Pope says Mass for more than 60,000 people and hundreds of priests at Yankee Stadium. The only hitch is that the armor-plated Popemobile is not permitted to drive on the grass and will be confined to paved areas.

“The Yankees had only one request, and that is that we not touch their grass,” said Mark Ackermann, who is running the Office of the Papal Visit for the New York archdiocese. “The All-Star game will be there this year and of course we're all confident that the World Series will be there as well. So the Yankees need to keep it in good shape and we've been most respectful of that.”

Throughout the visit, goodwill is expected to surround the Pope, even from non-Christians.

In fact, just before he leaves Washington he will be greeted by young representatives of the faiths of Islam, Judaism, Jain, Buddhism, and Hinduism in the rotunda at the John Paul II Cultural Center.

One of those representatives is a young Pakistani woman named Saman Hussain who represents the Muslim community. She will give him one of the most poetic verses of the holy Qur'an (24.35) written in traditional Muslim calligraphy.

In a statement appearing on the Washington Archdiocesan website, she summed up what the Pope's visit means to us all.

“Ultimately, we share a common earth,” she said, “and ought to embrace and treasure our universal humanity.”

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