

Remembering Pope John Paul II's visit to St. Louis

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STORY FROM JAN. 28, 1999:

With a wave of his hand and a solitary climb up the airplane steps, John Paul II said goodbye to St. Louis on Wednesday evening.

In 31 whirlwind hours, this pope -- the first ever to visit the St. Louis area -- had stirred the souls of his faithful and captured the hearts of a city. "I will always remember St. Louis," he said in a final ecumenical service at the St. Louis Cathedral. "I will remember all of you. God bless St. Louis! God bless America!"

After the eight months of anticipation and hoopla, the visit flew past in a quick succession of motorcades and big, enthusiastic religious services. At 8:25 p.m., John Paul left for his home in Rome on a Trans World Airlines Boeing 767.

During his two days in St. Louis, more than 130,000 people filled the Kiel Center, the Trans World Dome and the Cathedral to see and pray with the frail but determined 78-year-old leader of the Roman Catholic faith.

Never before have St. Louisans met the likes of a man like John Paul.

Not even the bulletproof glass, the legion of Secret Service agents or the monstrous proportions of the stadium crowds could stop John Paul from winning folks over.

"I feel incredibly blessed just to be in his presence," said papal-visit volunteer Teresa Saltsman, 38, of Rock Island, Ill., as she waited for the pope to bless the crowd after Wednesday's final service at the Cathedral. "It sets your soul on fire. The love in his eyes, you can just see it."

As she left Wednesday morning's Mass at the Trans World Dome with tears in her eyes, Dolores Shepard of Jefferson City said simply: "This was like a preface to heaven."

Much of the visit inevitably unfolded as public pageant. But John Paul came to St. Louis as a pastor and preacher.

He stuck to often-repeated themes, such as his championship of dignity for all human life, from the unborn to condemned criminals, and his call for spiritual revival for the Third Millennium. He preached cultural renewal with Christian love as the inspiration and the family as its primary building block.

"As the family goes, so goes the nation," John Paul said during the Mass on Wednesday morning, which was the biggest event of his visit and the largest indoor gathering ever in the United States.

The 104,000 faithful who attended the Mass in the Dome and adjoining Cervantes Convention Center exhibition halls listened respectfully and participated en masse in the songs and liturgical responses. They also cheered loudly and often as John Paul arrived, spoke with praise of St. Louis history and pleaded for renewal.

By habit, Catholics usually don't clap and cheer during Mass. Introducing new parish council members or school teachers will get brief applause, but Catholics normally keep to their traditional liturgy.

Wednesday was no ordinary Mass.

Worshippers had begun arriving in buses even before the Dome doors opened at 4 a.m. Many stood in lines for more than an hour before they could clear through the metal detectors and security checks. They listened to early morning songs and warm-up sermons, wandered the stadium or, if they were lucky, caught catnaps in lounge chairs on the club level.

Nobody seemed to be complaining about the wait.

"The time went by pretty quickly," said Joseph Ruzicka, 71, of south St. Louis. "This is a much happier crowd than the ones you see here for the Rams."

And when John Paul arrived inside, they let loose. They cheered heartily when the pope praised St. Louis' Catholic heritage, when Archbishop Justin F. Rigali spoke proudly of all the prayers for all the good weather and just about whenever anyone said something noteworthy.

Flashbulbs sparkled from throughout the seats. Judging from the flashes, the premiere moment was when the pope raised the chalice during consecration, the most solemn moment of the Mass. The eruption of light surprised many in the congregation.

John Paul and church leaders appeared to accept it all as the expression of the treasured experience. That had been the mood of the faithful ever since the pope arrived shortly after 1 p.m. Tuesday.

The form of expression ranged from the raucous joy of young people in Kiel auditorium Tuesday evening to the respectful decorum of the ecumenical service in the cathedral Wednesday afternoon. Those who attended any of those services were virtually unanimous in their happiness for being there.

"It was wonderful to see him reach out to so many people," Carol Schmidt of Festus said after the Mass. "It was humbling and inspiring and spiritually very satisfying. I feel like I know this pope."

Schmidt, 56, attended with Lois Underwood, a Baptist who works with her at St. Pius X High School in Festus. Underwood said she was pleased that "this message wasn't just for Catholics."

Mary Bottini, 44, of the Oakville area, spoke afterward "of the feeling of grace all around us."

Throughout the visit, the only much noted disappointment concerned the size of the crowds that gathered for the pope's four rides through St. Louis in the armored, glass-topped popemobile. On both days, there were empty places along the orange plastic fence that the city had stretched along both sides of the seven miles used by the motorcades. Even Wednesday's high temperature of 68 degrees didn't bring out the parade watchers.

During his trip Wednesday morning from Rigali's residence to the Dome, crowds assembled in bunches -- at the Cathedral, in front of large companies like A.G.

Edwards & Sons and at the big intersections downtown. People who showed up said they knew others who stayed home to watch on television or who were scared off by the predictions of traffic jams.

Business owners and street vendors looking for sales to the crowds also didn't like the turnout, but most of the people who did show up were glad they did.

Steve Mamanella, a spokesman for the St. Louis archdiocese, said church leaders were not concerned by the post-motorcade laments. He said John Paul's four motorcades covered more than 18 miles. By contrast, the pope went on only one motorcade each during previous visits to New York and Baltimore.

People had one last chance to see him in the popemobile after he left the ecumenical service in the Cathedral back to the archbishop's residence shortly after 6 p.m. He left for Lambert Field shortly afterward in an armored limousine.

The cathedral service also provided a rare opportunity for people to shake the pope's hand or just reach out and touch him. John Paul grasped outstretched hands, hugged children, and blessed rosaries and people as he walked down the main aisle.

He shook hands with Rosa Parks, whose refusal to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955 sparked the first big bus boycott of the civil rights movement. And he got in a plug for Cardinal Ritter Preparatory High School, the archdiocesan high school in north St. Louis.

Before he left the Cathedral, he spoke these parting words:

"I would have wished to meet personally each one of the young people at the Kiel Center, and all the many other people at the Trans World Dome and here in the Cathedral Basilica, as well as along the routes and at the airport."

To hear it from many of those people, he already had.

<http://www.stltoday.com/stltoday/news/stories.nsf/religion/story/39F9EA0549838A3D8625754B005CF421?OpenDocument>