

At center named for Blessed John Paul II, people remember his legacy

WASHINGTON – Catholics of all ages from throughout the Washington area, with roots in countries around the world, came together at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center May 1 to remember the life and holiness of a man who that day was declared as “Blessed” by his successor, Pope Benedict XVI.

About 150 people watched all or part of Blessed John Paul II’s nearly three-hour beatification Mass at the center, which replayed EWTN’s live broadcast from nearly 12 hours earlier, projecting it onto a big screen in the center’s auditorium. The silhouetted figures intently watching the Mass included young adults, the elderly, priests, women religious and families with children.

“This man crossed generations, crossed borders, crossed faiths to bring people the light of Christ,” said EWTN anchor Raymond Arroyo during the telecast, in words that reflected the more than 1 million pilgrims in St. Peter’s Square that day and the hundreds who gathered at the center in Washington named in honor of the late pope.

Alessandro Maffioli, an economist, had come to the center with his wife Valeria, pushing their newborn son Giacomo, 4 months old, in a stroller. The Italian natives were 7 and 5 years old, respectively, when the new Pope John Paul II appeared on the balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica and encouraged people to “Be not afraid.”

“He was our pope,” said Valeria. She and her husband, who are members of the Catholic movement Communion and Liberation, said they grew up witnessing the pope’s love for Christ, and that changed their lives. Like many young people around the world, they were inspired by him, by “his strength, his capacity to transmit his love, his passion for Christ, and communicate that to everybody,” Alessandro said.

Visitors to the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center that afternoon were given a commemorative holy card for the day of his beatification, that on one side had a photo of Pope John Paul II elevating a chalice, and on the other side included words

from his first Mass as pope on Oct. 22, 1978, the day of the year that will now be his feast day: "Be not afraid! Open wide the doors to Christ!"

Those same words appeared on a large banner hanging from the colonnade that day in St. Peter's Square that could be seen in some of the crowd shots during the telecast.

After the broadcast of the Mass, the visitors to the Pope John Paul II center enjoyed food and champagne or soda at a reception outside the auditorium, where they reflected on the faith and legacy of the pope who had touched their lives.

"He lived Christ's teaching and he embodied Christ's message," said Desire Ravonimanantsoa, who supervises a laboratory at the Lombardi Cancer Center at Georgetown University Hospital. A native of Madagascar, he witnessed Pope John Paul II's 1989 visit to that country. "He was very concerned about poverty, and he urged people to do something about it," said the researcher, who was inspired by the pontiff's work on behalf of peace and human rights around the world.

Maria St. Catherine, a scholar who works with the Boston-based Institute on Vatican Diplomacy, said, "He inspires all of us to be ambassadors for Christ. He traveled all over the world. He touched everyone. That's one of his greatest legacies. He taught us the church is truly inclusive, it includes everyone."

Young adults Meghan McCartney and Angela Telthorst, who work with the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, also watched the telecast of the beatification Mass of the pope who changed their lives.

"He's been our spiritual father," said McCartney. "He brought forward the new evangelization that lit a fire in me, and was a cause of my reconversion back to the church, an awakening that I had a role in this new springtime" of faith.

Reading and studying about Blessed John Paul II and hearing his call to young people "made me proud to embrace my Catholic faith," said Telthorst. And watching how the pontiff suffered in his last years "helped me embrace my own crosses," she said.

The cultural center named for Blessed John Paul, which opened in 2001, is currently

up for sale and open only by appointment but scheduled several events during the beatification weekend.