

At Nationals Park, a very long day, but ‘the Holy Spirit was there’

WASHINGTON – People who had a professional interest in the April 17 papal Mass at Nationals Stadium – security, media reps, choirs, musicians, stadium facilitators, food coordinators and souvenir vendors – began arriving as early as 3 a.m.

By 6 a.m. choirs positioned in the seats directly behind the makeshift altar were transported front and center to the humongous, walk-on-water TV screen with perfect color and sound towering in the backdrop of the papal altar. Smaller monitors were replicated throughout the stadium.

“I wonder if they truly realize just how stunning they are,” said one woman who watched in rapt attention to rehearsals featuring stately soloists and passionate ensembles coordinated in dress.

“Ave Maria ... gratia plena ...” echoed all around, typical of music so hauntingly beautiful that one could just imagine it filling an entire stadium with fallen-away Catholics unable to resist its siren call to come home.

But mesmerized as they were, many in the stands patiently waiting to see Pope Benedict XVI still had questions on their minds for him. Franco and Bianca Gentile, a brother and sister in their 20s from Baltimore, wanted to ask the pope if America’s youths can make a difference “in our ever-changing, materialistic society.” They were proud of the teen and young adult population in Baltimore, who they said are “very actively involved in church life.”

Their mother, Paula Gentile, added that she and others “want the Catholic Church to truly do something about the sexual predator priest problem. Just saying the church is sorry is not enough.”

Delphine Adeluwoye, a baby boomer from Alexandria, Va., said nothing can shake her from her faith.

“I will die a Catholic,” she vowed.

Joy Gross of Pasadena, Md., longed for the pope to tell her what she can do “as a mother and grandmother of 14 grandchildren” to help them “carry on our faith and help them to teach (it to) their children some day.”

Her teenage grandson, Logan, said he’d love to tell the pope how “cool” he thinks the pope’s job is, and how “awesome” he thinks the pope himself is.

“Even if being the pope is hard,” Logan said, “I would still love to be the pope when I grow up because already right now I’m an altar server. I think it’d be a great job ... meeting new people and doing new things.”

So engrossed were people in their conversations and wanderings around the grounds, or with covering their heads with booklets, hats or jackets to escape a merciless sun, that at first many did not notice that the TV monitor switched from the processional of clergy and other dignitaries onto the field to an advancing motorcade of flashing red and blue lights and sirens – Pope Benedict in his popemobile.

When the popemobile entered the stadium, circling it, wild applause came from each stand as the pope passed in front of it. Many waved little yellow and white Vatican flags to greet the pontiff. But when Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl of Washington said, “Holy Father, welcome to Washington,” the applause was both united and resounding. Cries of “Viva, Papa!” erupted, too.

Pope Benedict, now resplendent in crimson, gold and ivory, was there at last, and he had come, he later said in his homily, “to proclaim anew, as Peter proclaimed on the day of Pentecost, that Jesus Christ is lord and Messiah, risen from the dead, seated in glory at the right hand of the Father, and established as judge of the living and the dead.”

Americans, the pope said, “have always been a people of hope.” And in the context of that hope “born of God’s love and fidelity,” he acknowledged “the pain which the church in America has experienced as a result of the sexual abuse of minors.”

Pope Benedict, who called upon Catholics to “love your priests,” said measures to protect victims must be continued along with other efforts to foster healing and

reconciliation.

After the event, Dr. James Marsh, director of the Student Health Service at Georgetown University and a member of the papal Mass choir, said after seven weeks of weekly rehearsal, "Everything came together so beautifully today ... the setting, the sounds, the sites, the words of the Holy Father - it was really incredible."

"With 45,000 people, it still was very intimate," he added. "The Holy Spirit was there."

Contributing to this story was Dennis Sadowski.