

Cool, Man, Real Cool...

The Catholic Review

Several years ago, when I was Archbishop for the Military Archdiocese, I experienced an unexpected but very memorable encounter during a long midnight layover in Anchorage on a pastoral visit to our bases in the Far East.

The encounter was with a young man who could have been a poster boy for what was then frequently referred to as Generation X: Yellow-bordering-on-orange hair that was spiked in every direction; steel rings ornamenting both ears and lower lip; and clothes that could have been borrowed from someone three times his size. He spotted my Roman collar and started toward me.

By now it was 2:00 a.m. and, groggy as I was, I did not think it an ideal moment for a theological discussion or personal evangelization. But it proved to be the latter, with my being evangelized.

As he emerged from several clusters of cultural cohorts, I tried to muster up a welcoming smile. He offered me a book and a pen and asked if I would sign his Bible. He thanked me for doing so and as I handed the Bible back to him, he didn't ask whether I was a priest, pastor or minister. Instead, he asked what I did.

"Do you preach about Jesus?"

I replied that I did, which won his evangelizing reply, "Cool, man, real cool... to spend your life preaching about Jesus."

He was right on!

Though that incident occurred in April of 1999, I have never forgotten that colorful moment. And I thought of it most especially through the "Pope Week" still on everyone's minds. I suspect that the frenzied greeting the Holy Father received from the overflow turnout of more than 30,000 youth at St. Joseph's Seminary had much to do with the fact that he was there to preach to them about Jesus—as he has done

all his life.

With a bright smile and in simple prose, he reminded them, through repeated interruptions of applause, that “God is our origin and destination, and Jesus the Way,” though “the path of that journey twists and turns.” And even as he enumerated the many obstacles and detours that could result in losing the Way, he challenged the young people: “Christ’s light beckons you to be guiding stars for others, walking Christ’s way of forgiveness, reconciliation, humility, joy and peace.” (How appropriate since it is these very virtues in Benedict XVI, I suspect, that attracted so many to him and his message.)

And to the strongest of all the applause of the afternoon, “Dear young people, finally I wish to share a word about vocations.” The crowd erupted as he focused them on the call that Christ seeks to give to each one of us. The pope spoke of married life and families, religious and priests, and centered his final questions on the One about whom he came to preach:

“Friends, again I ask you, what about today? What are you seeking? What is God whispering to you? The hope that never disappoints is Jesus Christ.”

Surely, not a “hard sell” but a convincing plea by a physically aged, but spiritually young and spry vicar of Christ, a transparently holy man who continues spending his life preaching about Jesus. And like my Bible-toting friend in Anchorage, the cheering youth in Yonkers obviously thought that to be “Cool, man, real cool!”