

Dignitaries moved by papal visit

Among the throngs of Catholics who greeted Pope Benedict XVI during his papal visit to the United States were scores of government officials, institutional leaders and other dignities.

Gov. Martin J. O'Malley sat in the front row during the Mass celebrated at Nationals Ballpark in Washington, D.C. He attended the event with his father-in-law, former Maryland Attorney General, Joseph Curran.

"It was a terrific day," Gov. O'Malley said. "It couldn't have been a nicer Mass."

The governor said the tone and the mood inside the ballpark was one of "eager anticipation and a lot of joy all around."

"There was a tremendous display of the beauty and diversity of mankind, whether in the prayers of the faithful or the offertory," he said. "It was a beautiful repudiation, if you will, of a lot of the sort of immigrant bashing that we hear too much of in our country today."

The governor said for him, the highlight of the Mass was "the celebration of the universal church and the diverse language and cultures represented."

"It was a celebration of the cultural diversity of the planet and, really, I think, more than anything else, what I'll recall," he said.

Richard J. Dowling, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, said he was impressed by the pope's understanding of the sex abuse scandals in the United States and his outreach to victims.

"His statements and his visits with Boston victims of sexual abuse take us a long way down the road of healing," said Mr. Dowling, who attended the White House welcoming ceremony, the Mass at Nationals Park and the departure ceremony for New York.

The pope understood the importance of the "decisive steps" taken by dioceses across the country to end abuse and reach out to victims, Mr. Dowling said.

Mr. Dowling was “greatly pleased” by the reaction of Catholics to the pope.

“They seemed struck by his warmth, his humility and what seemed to be a bashfulness,” said Mr. Dowling. “His remarks were models of clarity, keen logic and benevolence.”

Larry Beck, president of Good Samaritan Hospital in Baltimore and a recipient of a 2007 papal honor, said he was among the 7,000 people from across the country invited to attend the welcoming ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House.

“It was an incredible experience,” said Mr. Beck, a parishioner of St. Pius X, Rodgers Forge, who was about 50 yards from the pontiff and President George W. Bush. “I realized, once I was there, how special and humbled I felt.”

Mr. Beck arrived at the White House at 7:30 a.m. and was about five rows back. His wife, Debbie, watched from Pennsylvania Avenue,

“I had a bird’s-eye view of the whole thing,” said Mr. Beck, noting that there were some 5,000 people behind him. “The pope’s words were very inspirational.”

Mr. Beck said he allowed some shorter individuals to stand in front of him so they could have a clear view of the pontiff.

“One woman I let see the pope turned to me afterwards and had tears in her eyes,” he said. “It was a real sense of community.”

Mr. Beck described the ceremony as glamorous, with flags, a U.S. Marine band, cardinals, bishops and elected officials, with the White House as the backdrop.

I wish I had a banner that said, “The pope really is a good Samaritan,” Mr. Beck said.

Jennifer Williams and George P. Matysek Jr. contributed to this story.