

Faithful excited to be part of papal Mass in Washington

WASHINGTON – The tumultuous applause that greeted Pope Benedict XVI at the beginning of the April 17 Mass in Nationals Park was indicative of the excitement of the faithful at attending the first public U.S. Mass celebrated by the pope, who is concluding his third year as pontiff.

The cries, shouts of acclamation and waving of miniature Vatican flags that accompanied the popemobile's lap around the baseball stadium close to a half-hour before the Mass came as close on the decibel scale as the ovation accorded the beginning of Washington Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl's welcome message to the pope.

An estimated 46,000 Catholics – about 5,000 more than the baseball park's official capacity, thanks to white folding chairs placed in the outfield near the temporary stage for the altar and sanctuary – assembled for the Mass. Each person had a slightly different story of how they got their tickets and how they got to the stadium.

But nearly all shared in the excitement of being at least some part of the first papal Mass in the nation's capital since Pope John Paul II celebrated Mass for an estimated 170,000 on the National Mall as part of his first U.S. visit in 1979.

Lisa Y. Williams, 46, a member of St. Gabriel Parish in Washington, said she heard about her parish's ticket distribution plan from her pastor, Father Tom Gude, during a meeting of the parish Sodality, of which she is a member.

"When Father announced at the Sodality meeting that you had to call the rectory, I went right home and left a message," Williams told Catholic News Service. She said she was one of the fortunate few from her parish to receive a ticket.

And what a ticket: a seat close to the front in the lower bowl of the four-tiered stadium, not including the luxury-suite level typically built by the Washington Nationals' owners for the benefit of the well-heeled season-ticket crowd.

"I'm so excited I can't even tell you. I can't even put it into words," Williams said. "I went down to see my seat for a moment. It was so overwhelming I had to come back up here" to the concourse.

Susan Snyder, a member of St. Francis de Sales Parish in Purcellville, Va., was excited to be a volunteer, outfitted with a bright red jacket with the vertically rectangular logo of Pope Benedict's visit to Washington.

Snyder had been to Nationals Park to see a baseball game before the April 17 Mass. In fact, she had been to two, the opening day game that ushered in the new stadium March 30 and an April 11 contest. But the announced opening day paid attendance of 39,000-plus was outdone by the papal Mass crowd.

"Our duty is to greet and seat them," Ms. Snyder said. She also had to give a lot of directions to Mass attendees, most of whom had never set foot in the stadium.

Dr. Patricio Moybal, a pediatrician, came with his 13-year-old daughter, Vicki. For the teen, it was her first papal Mass. But for Moybal, a native of Argentina, it was his second.

He voiced his gratitude to Pope John Paul for celebrating Mass in Argentina around the time of the Falklands War between England and Argentina.

"I got a chance to kiss his hand. It was fantastic," he remembered.

Moybal was grateful then for the pope's call for peace.

"In Argentina, the pope stopped two wars - the war with Chile and the Falklands War," he said. He called Pope Benedict's U.S. visit "great. Great for America, and great for all of us."

As long lines developed near kiosks featuring papal-visit souvenirs, some shoppers knew what they wanted to buy.

"I'm going to get T-shirts for my daughter and her three friends who couldn't be here," said Jane Romero, a member of St. Mary Parish in Rockville, Md.

"And I'm getting one for her," Ms. Romero added, motioning toward Theresa

Babendreier, 13, who was to be confirmed at the church May 9, with Romero as her sponsor.

Five buses rolled out from Our Lady of Good Counsel High School in Olney, Md., at 5:15 a.m. to take 177 students, faculty and staff to the Mass. Jay Tran, a 14-year-old Good Counsel freshman, said he had to wake up at 3 a.m. to get to school on time.

The students were decked out in powder-blue shirts, seated in the lower deck in right field. They were close to the papal altar located in deep center field, but their view was partially obstructed by one of two temporary 75-foot towers draped on all four sides with banners with the local papal visit logo.

"That's all right," said Zak Fetters, 14, a freshman at the school. "This is pretty close anyway."

An even earlier wake-up than Tran's was the one for Deacon Bob Werner of Sacred Heart Parish in Lancaster, Pa., whose bus left Lancaster for Washington at 3 a.m., necessitating a 1:30 a.m. wake-up call.

Deacon Werner didn't get to sleep until 10 p.m. the night before, but said he managed to get some shut-eye on the bus trip. He was walking outside the second-level vesting quarters for priests and deacons, waiting for an assignment for where he would distribute Communion for the Mass.