

Military members, their families enjoy sharing faith with many cultures

MADRID - Although he and his group were unable to get very close to welcome Pope Benedict XVI to World Youth Day, Erick Arellano, a senior airman with the U.S. Air Force, still felt the excitement of being among the thousands that packed the Spanish capital's Plaza de Cibeles.

"We couldn't get that close. We were somewhere in the middle," Arellano said of getting a glimpse of Pope Benedict as the popemobile passed through the packed plaza.

"It was quite an experience, hard to explain and one that gave me goose bumps because you get this feeling of peace," said Arellano, 27, a native of California.

Catholics serving in the U.S. military, their children and others working with military families in the U.S. and Europe said they enjoyed the opportunity to experience their faith with thousands of fellow Catholics from around the world.

An estimated 155 children of active-duty members were lodged at U.S. military installations near Madrid during World Youth Day.

As Arellano made his way to the English-language catechesis sessions for World Youth Day pilgrims Aug. 19, he said he enjoyed being among people representing many different cultures.

"It brings unity. I am taking a lot of things to heart," said Arellano, a eucharistic minister, usher and a sacristan at Our Lady of the Sky Catholic Community at the Royal Air Force base at Lakenheath, England.

"When (military personnel) travel to those countries, they will have a little more knowledge of how that country works," he added. "I look forward to walking around and making friends so that when I go to their countries I can be welcomed The

Spirit is definitely working upon us here.”

Ian Hart, 17, a member of a U.S. military family based in Europe, attended World Youth Day with a group that included 12 youths and five adults. He said he was most impressed with the classic look of Madrid and the impressive sites that the group has visited.

“This is a lot different from America, and military families don’t get out much,” he said. “The architecture, the buildings, the food, the music, statues and the culture we find here in Spain, there is a way of life here.”

Hart and his group saw the pope at the welcoming event and were looking forward to seeing the pontiff again.

“We did see him only for a few seconds, but it was worth the wait. It was extremely empowering. I have never seen a pope or even a cardinal before. It was a great inspiration; he is not just a figurehead in Rome, this makes him a person,” he said.

Jason Sclafani, 30, a youth minister and civilian contractor at Most Holy Trinity Catholic Chapel at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, N.Y., said attending events such as a World Youth Day is always chaotic and logistically difficult.

He said he spent four hours waiting in the wrong place before relocating to a spot along the pope’s route. He said his group got “two four-second glimpses” of Pope Benedict.

“But in the end it is always worth it, and the kids get a lot out of everything we do, spiritually and culturally,” he said.

Sclafani compared the long wait for the pope with people living in the Holy Land at the time of Christ who would travel from town to town to get a glimpse of Jesus.

“And here we are traveling around, seeking a glimpse of the pope,” he said.

Brandon Brown, 16, whose parents serve in the U.S. Air Force in England and who traveled to Madrid with his sister, Bailey, said his group mistakenly entered the wrong train on Madrid’s crowded Metro system and spent four hours moving about

the city, arriving too late for the welcoming ceremony.

Still, Brown said on the way to a morning catechetical session Aug. 19, he has enjoyed the long walks around Madrid, the group togetherness and learning about his religion.

“It is nice and warm here, like a great vacation from England,” he said, adding that the weekend events with the pope would be a great finale to his pilgrimage.

“It will be the best part of the trip, I can’t wait. To see the pope on the weekend, I can’t wait,” he said.