

‘Move forward’ in faith, pope urges Catholics at Yankee Stadium Mass

NEW YORK - At Yankee Stadium, transformed into an open-air church April 20, Pope Benedict XVI urged more than 57,000 Catholics to “move forward with firm resolve” in continuing the legacy of faith set in motion by the country’s first Catholics.

“Follow faithfully in the footsteps of those who have gone before you!” he told the stadium congregation on a cool, breezy and overcast afternoon.

“Past generations have left you an impressive legacy,” he said, adding that “on these solid foundations the future of the church in America, must even now begin to rise.”

The congregation welcomed the pope to by waving gold and white handkerchiefs and cheering “Benedetto” (“Benedict” in Italian) upon his arrival and immediately after his homily.

They cheered loudly and yelled, “We love you” while waving handkerchiefs upon the pope’s final procession from the ball field on his last Mass during his six-day visit to the United States.

During the pope’s homily they applauded his message of defending the rights of “unborn child in the mother’s womb” and his encouragement to young men and young women to “follow in the footsteps of Christ, who was willing to lay down his life for his friends.”

The crowd also applauded at the pope’s final words of his homily, saying that Jesus is the way that leads to eternal happiness ... and the life who brings ever new joy

and hope, to us and to our world.”

The pope made several references to freedom and said society “rightly places a high value on personal freedom,” yet he cautioned that American Catholics should “use wisely the blessings of freedom” to “build a future of hope for coming generations.”

The Mass was a celebration of the 200th anniversaries of the archdioceses of New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Louisville, Ky., and of the elevation of Baltimore to an archdiocese. It was from Baltimore, the nation’s first diocese, that the other four were created.

Banners covering the scoreboard and located near the jumbo screens honored each archdiocese; each was named in welcoming remarks by New York Cardinal Edward M. Egan.

The ballpark, known by many as the “house that Ruth built,” a reference to famous Yankee Babe Ruth, took on an entirely different look with an altar and papal throne placed over second base and all billboards covered with cloth. Pennant flags were replaced with flags of purple, yellow and white.

The pope and U.S. cardinals emerged for the opening procession from the players’ dugout. Papal Masses are not new to this stadium, which was built in 1923 and is in its last season. A new stadium is being built right beside it. Pope Paul VI celebrated Mass at the stadium in 1965 and Pope John Paul II did in 1979.

Prior to the beginning of Mass, the congregation lined the concourses for food and some purchased rosaries and T-shirts commemorating Pope Benedict’s U.S. visit.

Sister Thomas Donohue, a Sister of Charity from Nanuet, N.Y., who wore a gold kerchief around her neck, said before the Mass that she had a “sense of God’s presence here.”

“There is a sense of peace, a sense of the Holy Spirit being with us,” she told Catholic News Service. Although she eagerly anticipated seeing the pope, she was inspired to see so many in the stadium, especially those who traveled great distances.

“They have a need to be in this man’s presence,” she said, “and he is able to bring us God’s spirit.”

In his homily, the pope praised the early church in the United States for establishing “a network of churches, educational, health care and social institutions which have long been the hallmarks of the church in this land.” He also noted that “in this land of religious liberty,” early Catholics found freedom not only to practice their faith but participate fully in public life.

“From a small flock,” he said, the U.S. church has been united in its profession of faith and “contributed significantly to the growth of American society as a whole.”

The pope acknowledged that the apostles and then the early church in the U.S. faced challenges in living out their faith, not unlike U.S. Catholics today.

For men and women to truly live out their faith, he said, Catholics must face challenges with confidence and “not lose heart in the face of resistance, adversity and scandal.”

Although he alluded to scandal in a general way, he did not speak of the church’s sexual abuse scandal as he did in many other venues during his U.S. visit.

Pope Benedict praised the U.S. Catholic Church for being “outstanding in its prophetic witness in the defense of life, in the education of the young, in care for the poor, the sick and the stranger in your midst.”

He urged Catholics to pray fervently for the coming of the kingdom but urged them to at the same time be “constantly alert for the signs of its presence and working for its growth in every sector of society.”

This “means overcoming every separation between faith and life and countering the false gospels of freedom and happiness,” he said. “It also means rejecting a false dichotomy between faith and political life and ... working to enrich American society and culture” as well as “never losing sight of that great hope which gives meaning and value to all other hopes which inspire our lives.”

The pope made a special appeal to young people, urging them to “step forward and take up the responsibility which your faith in Christ sets before you.”

“Young men and women of America, I urge you; open your hearts to the Lord’s call to follow him in the priesthood and religious life.”

He also urged other Catholics to give these young people, whom he called “the future of the church,” all the prayer and support they can give them.

The message echoed what he had told them the previous night at a rally for seminarians and young people at St. Joseph’s Seminary in Yonkers.

Trish Bailey, a 32-year-old from Rochester, who attended the rally and also was at the Yankee Stadium Mass, said: “It feels like a tremendous privilege that the Holy Father takes such interest in America and youth.”

The pope’s message of encouragement to young people “needs to be heard,” she said. “He believes in us more than we believe in ourselves,” she added.