

# Pope blesses disabled youths at Yonkers seminary event

YONKERS, N.Y. – In the most intimate public event of the papal visit so far, Pope Benedict XVI blessed 56 disabled youths and their caregivers in the chapel of St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers April 19.

"God has blessed you with life, and with differing talents and gifts. Through these you are able to serve him and society in various ways," the pope said. "While some people's contributions seem greater and others' more modest, the witness value of our efforts is always a sign of hope for everyone."

He said, "Sometimes it is challenging to find a reason for what appears only as a difficulty to be overcome or even pain to be endured. Yet your faith helps you to break open the horizon beyond your own selves in order to see life as God does."

"God's unconditional love, which bathes every human individual, points to a meaning and purpose for all human life," he continued. "Through his cross, Jesus in fact draws us into his saving love and in so doing shows us the way ahead – the way of hope which transfigures us all, so that we too, become bearers of that hope and charity for others."

The youths, ranging in age from 3 to 18, were chosen from throughout the Archdiocese of New York by Catholic Charities and displayed a range of physical, emotional and developmental disabilities. Some were in wheelchairs or strollers. Others sat with their caregivers in the pews, which face the center aisle of the small chapel.

The pope was welcomed to St. Joseph's by New York Auxiliary Bishop Gerald T. Walsh, rector of the seminary, and was Cardinal Edward M. Egan of New York. He entered the building to cheers of "Benedetto!" ("Benedict" in Italian) from those who had gathered outside to catch a glimpse of his arrival.

As he walked up the chapel's aisle, he greeted each youngster, laying a hand on some of the children's heads, grasping their hands, cuddling their faces or tracing a

blessing on foreheads.

At the front of the chapel, he greeted and spoke quietly with a smiling Monsignor Kevin Sullivan, director of Catholic Charities for the Archdiocese of New York.

Then three youths approached the pope: Neyshadli Kenney, from St. Ursula Learning Center in Mount Vernon; Lauren Kurtz from Holy Family Parish in the Bronx; and Caitlin Menno from St. Charles Parish on Staten Island.

Kenney thanked the pope for taking the time to visit. She said, "Your presence inspires us to be stronger Christians and love Jesus more. May your presence also remind everybody in our world that all human life is sacred, even when challenged."

Lauren and Caitlin presented the pope with a painting by a young artist who lives at a Catholic Charities residence.

The Cathedral of St. Patrick Young Singers and the New York Archdiocesan Deaf Choir performed "Take Lord, Receive" by Jesuit Father John Foley.

The deaf choir, a group of 16 adults based at St. Elizabeth of Hungary Parish in New York, is led by Monsignor Patrick McCahill. The priest learned American Sign Language while he was a seminarian at St. Joseph's 40 years ago and is the moderator of the New York archdiocesan ministry for the deaf and the pastor of St. Elizabeth.

Before giving his apostolic blessing to the crowd, he encouraged the youths and their caregivers to "pray every day for our world. There are so many intentions and people you can pray for, including those who have not yet come to know Jesus."

He also asked for continued prayers for himself. "As you know, I have just had another birthday. Time passes!" he said. Pope Benedict turned 81 April 16.

Behind the rows of disabled youths and their caregivers were scores of patrons of both the archdiocese and the seminary.

In the hallways facing the entrance to the chapel, hundreds of chairs were set up for guests who included senior priests, faculty and staff of the seminary and

benefactors.

In an interview with Catholic News Service prior to the event, Monsignor McCahill described translating the song lyrics performed by the choir into American Sign Language.

“What I have to do is take the words and music and (render it) concept by concept, rather than word by word, and make it visually attractive,” he said. “If it’s done well, it’s almost balletic.”