

U.S. Catholics give warm welcome to a previously unfamiliar pope

NEW YORK – As they prepared to meet Pope Benedict XVI for his first papal visit to the United States, many U.S. Catholics couldn't help but compare him to Pope John Paul II, whom they had known for nearly three decades.

In part, that was because they just didn't know much about Pope Benedict, who began the fourth year of his pontificate during his April 15-20 trip to the United States. The third anniversary of his election was April 19.

He has often been portrayed as being strict and scholarly and lacking the charisma of his predecessor.

But that perception seemed to change during his six-day visit.

"A lot of people thought he couldn't replace (Pope) John Paul, but he can," said Carol Henglein, a parishioner from St. Virgilius Church in Queens prior to the April 20 Mass at Yankee Stadium.

She described the 81-year-old pontiff as having "an aura about him" and being a "wonderful inspiration to young people."

And sure enough, the young people seemed to "get him," especially during the April 19 rally for seminarians and young people on the grounds of St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, which was reminiscent of a World Youth Day with Pope John Paul.

During the rally, the 25,000 participants frequently cheered for Pope Benedict and he in turn, much like his predecessor at youth events, seemed visibly invigorated.

At the rally, the pope smiled broadly and even spontaneously moved to the first few rows to grasp hands with the youths. During his address the crowd repeatedly interrupted him with applause and cheers, unlike the crowds at most venues of the pope's visit, where the applause interruptions were fewer.

If the clapping was restrained in some cases, it may have been because his listeners

did not fully understand the pope, who delivered his speeches in a soft voice with a German accent.

And sometimes the words were just not sound-bite material that would generate a cheering response. Many of his talks reflected his scholarly background and might have to be read and reread to unpack their meaning.

Several priests and women religious at the April 19 Mass for clergy and religious at St. Patrick's Cathedral told Catholic News Service they wanted to get a copy of the text and look at it closely. Catholic college presidents said the same thing after he spoke to them April 17 at The Catholic University of America in Washington.

But even if they didn't pick up every word of the pope's remarks, those who heard him still came away with a familiarity with the pontiff they hadn't had before, along with a deeper appreciation for him.

Father Joseph Ferraro, pastor of St. Anthony Parish in Belleville, N.J., left the Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral overwhelmed by the experience but also with a sense that the pope was not a distant leader but "just like one of the family."

The pope also showed a humility that did not go unnoticed. At the end of the cathedral Mass, Pope Benedict made impromptu remarks thanking the priests and women religious for their love of the church, the Lord and also for their "love to the poor successor of St. Peter."

"I will do all that is possible to be a real successor of the great St. Peter, who also was a man with his faults and some sins, but he remains finally the rock for the church," he told them.

Sister Elizabeth Worley, a Sister of St. Joseph who is chancellor of administration and chief operating officer for the Diocese of Orlando, Fla., said she wanted to read the pope's homily to absorb it all, but she was impressed with how he described himself as a "poor successor of St. Peter."

Throughout Pope Benedict's U.S. visit, reminders of Pope John Paul were not hard to find. Pope Benedict quoted him on several occasions. Many places Pope Benedict visited - the White House, the United Nations, The Catholic University of America

and Yankee Stadium – repeated stops his predecessor had made.

Many who were analyzing the U.S. papal trip noted that during his six-day visit Pope Benedict came out from under Pope John Paul's shadow. And one television commentator comparing the two popes put it this way: "Pope John Paul II made us feel. Pope Benedict makes us think."