

## Reflections on the Papal Mass at Nationals Park (April 17, 2008)

Mark & Carolyn Coleman

In the days after we attended the Papal Mass, many thoughts came to mind about our experience. The more we thought about the Mass, the more we realized there are not enough words to properly relate what a wonderful and meaningful event it truly was. As we have assembled our reflections below, we have two prevailing impressions to mention first.

- The Mass was truly multi-cultural, with readings and songs done in many languages - English, Spanish, German (of course!), Tagalong, Vietnamese, Igbo, etc., plus we can't forget Latin. Considering that the word Catholic means "universal", we think it was all too appropriate that the Mass was representative of the wide variety of people and cultures in the U.S. and around the world.
- Everyone was so nice to each other, including the stadium workers and not just those associated with the Mass. There was a joyful spirit in the air, and people seemed truly happy to be there.

Here are our comments regarding the experience of attending the Papal Mass (in mostly chronological order).

1. We left Richmond for our hotel the night before (April 16). We arrived in DC around 9:00pm. We met Carolyn's cousins Michael and Maria Cistola at our hotel. They live in Virginia Beach, and they also received tickets in the Diocese of Richmond's lottery. Michael and Maria had the room right above ours. We all went down to the hotel bar and had a few drinks to visit with them that evening. It was around midnight when we got back to our room, and we tried to get to sleep but we were too excited thinking about the next day to get much rest.
2. Since we were concerned about the lines at the security checkpoint, we got up at 4:00am to get ready, and we left our hotel by 5:15am to walk to Nationals Park. It was pitch dark outside as we made the one-plus mile walk to the stadium. As we got close to the stadium on M Street, two different sets of police officers asked to check our tickets before we finally got to South Capitol Street, which runs alongside Nationals Park.
3. Because we got to the stadium around 5:45am, we walked right up to the security checkpoint and easily got through. It was just like the metal detectors at the airport. Poor Maria's feet were already hurting due to her less than comfortable shoes, and she still had a long day ahead of her!
4. By leaving the hotel rather quickly, we did not have coffee. So we looked around quickly and decided to look for some coffee. The first place we went to only had a little pot for coffee, so we decided to switch gears and look for some souvenirs. The first booth we got to had a small crowd. The vendor said they have more souvenir booths further into the park. Eventually we found a booth with no line and bought our Pope memorabilia. While Mark was in the souvenir line, Carolyn ran into and talked to Deacon Eric from our church. Carolyn also ran into Colleen Barranger from the Diocese of Richmond, who had spoken to this year's RCIA class regarding Justice and Peace issues. The checkout computer at the souvenir booth was messing up, and by the time it was working again, the line behind us had grown to about 7 deep and 5 wide. So getting there early was worth the "pain" of getting up at 4:00am – it got us through security easily, as well as through the souvenir stand quickly. We eventually found a vendor that had coffee, and we found a table to sit and drink coffee and have a Nutrigrain bar. Michael said he was beginning to feel human again after drinking his coffee.

5. The Confessions (reconciliation) tent was located right across from our table. Michael and Mark went together first. Being a new convert to Catholicism, this was only Mark's second time going to reconciliation. Mark had not intended to go to reconciliation that day, but he felt like he needed to, since it was part of the whole experience. Carolyn went to reconciliation after Michael and Mark had finished.
6. After sitting and relaxing for a bit, we decided to walk around a little more before going to our seats. We walked back by the security area, and the crowds of people in line to get into the stadium were very long, too long to see the end of them. We guessed that these were the same people that show up half way into Mass.
7. On our way to our seats, we again ran into Deacon Eric. He, like us, was almost giddy. The Deacons were going to serve communion on the concourse levels of the stadium, so we think he was near his area. Ironically, we ran into him just outside one of the club level bars. We got a picture with him, but we joked that we should have taken the picture by the beer taps, in honor of our previous Irish Priest Father Paddy.
8. When we got to our seats, we commented on how the Holy Spirit must have been part of the selection process. The reason why is because when we received our tickets, we saw that our seat numbers were 17 and 18, and Mark commented at the time that had they been seats 1 and 2, maybe we would have had gotten aisle seats. (*Mark's knees do better when he can use the aisle for legroom*). Well lo and behold, when we actually got to our seats, seat 18 was the aisle seat. We couldn't help but feel doubly blessed.
9. Not only were our seats around other parishioners from the Diocese of Richmond, they were right in the middle of other people from the Richmond area. In front of us, there were parishioners from St. Edward and Church of the Epiphany. Seated next to us were parishioners from St. Gabriel, St. Michael and St. Bridget. Behind us were more parishioners from St. Edward. One of the parishioners Carolyn met from St. Michael, Chris Deverell, knew Father Mike and said his sister had been baptized by him. Small world! From our seats we could see the altar straight ahead, but it was a bit far. On the field was the seating for the Priests, Cardinals, Bishops, etc. The choirs were in the stand to the left of the altar. We thought that the musical arrangements and performances by the different choirs were excellent! Plus toward the end of the Mass, Placido Domingo sang, and it was a thrill to listen to him.
10. For a bit, the sun actually got quite hot on our faces. We used the programs to shield our faces. Eventually the sun cleared the top of the stadium and we were in the shade. During the Mass, we saw two different people on the field need EMT attention, and we assumed it was due to the heat.
11. The prologue at the beginning of the Mass featured the Bishops and Cardinals processing in to take their seats.
12. At 9:20am, the public address announcer told everyone to immediately take their seats because the Holy Father had arrived at the stadium. You could really sense and feel a buzz or electricity waiting for him to arrive.
13. Around 9:30am, on the jumbo-tron screen you could see the Pope-mobile coming in from under the stadium, and the music got very "official" sounding. When the Pope-mobile came into sight from behind where the altar was, it was like a rock star had arrived! Everyone started cheering! It was very exciting and moving, too. We felt like we couldn't believe this was actually happening and we were there to experience it. There he was, Pope Benedict. He drove slowly around the perimeter of the

stadium, starting from left field and working his way around. We could see him lower the window in the Pope-mobile, in order to wave to the crowd. Then the Pope-mobile drove back under the stadium.

14. Not too long after that, we could see activity stirring in the Nationals dugout. And then we saw smoke from the dugout, which turned out to be incense. A few moments later, we could actually smell the incense wafting all the way up to where we were seated in section 212 (behind home plate, on the club level).
15. Later that day, we heard on the radio about how Archbishop Wuerl of the Archdiocese of Washington wanted this to be like a familiar American Mass. In this manner, the Pope processed in from the dugout and to the altar. There was a white carpet leading from the dugout through the infield, between two large sections of seating, and up to the altar in deep center field.
16. After the Pope was seated, Archbishop Wuerl welcomed the Pope to the U.S. with a wonderful speech that was frequently interrupted by cheers from the crowd.
17. Pope Benedict's homily had some note-worthy comments. He said that America is a place of opportunity, but that at times America has not had opportunities for all people, especially American Indians or slaves brought here in chains from Africa. He also went on to address the sexual abuse shame of the Church. Later again on the radio, the news reviewed the homily. The radio commentator pointed out how Pope Benedict said the whole situation was handled poorly by the Church. We thought this was important, because the Pope had made this comment in front of the Church's leadership (Cardinals, Bishops, etc.). We admired him for saying it and addressing the subject head on.
18. The communion flowed well on the concourses. There were signs on the railing in every section leading folks the right way (Communion ← and Communion Return ←).
19. Placido Domingo drew polite cheering when he began singing, since it was during the finishing stages of communion. He is known for being one of the famous three tenors. After he was done, he went over and kissed the Pope's hand or ring, and they were able to briefly greet each other.
20. At the end of the Mass, as the Pope left and walked back from the altar in center field to the Nationals dugout, we got a pretty close look at him and took some good pictures. As Pope Benedict was walking near the people on the field, he was shaking hands and greeting people, and the jumbo-tron even showed him lean over and kiss a baby. You could see people rush to the carpeted walkway to get a better look, and to try and touch him as he walked out.
21. After Mass was over, we grabbed our stuff and headed toward our hotel. Upon seeing the lines for souvenirs, we were very glad we had gotten our souvenirs before the Mass. And after seeing the lines outside the stadium waiting for buses and getting to the Metro, we were very glad we had stayed in a hotel and could walk to our car.
22. On our walk, we saw some protestors. Mark had a few thoughts on these people, of course:
  - a) Who has nothing better to do than to hold a sign and heckle people leaving from church? Maybe they need some worthy form of religion that would teach them to "Love thy brother".
  - b) One guy had an electronic megaphone like football coaches have. He went on and on saying nothing that made any sense. We couldn't even make enough sense of it to be offended. After, if Mark had had the time, he would have liked to ask the guy, "Do you speak Swahili (or any lesser-known foreign language)? Because what you are saying to the people leaving this Mass is making about as much sense as if you were speaking a foreign language."