

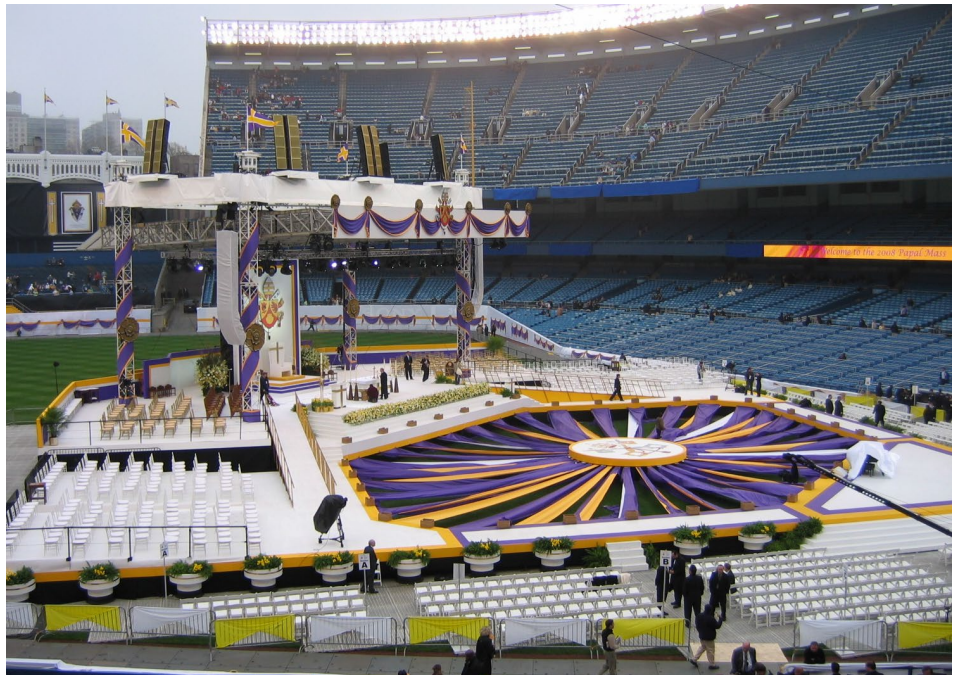
Witnessing “Christ Our Hope”
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A few weeks before Pope Benedict XVI was to come to America, my husband and I found out we were among the fortunate few receiving tickets from our parish to attend the Mass at Yankee Stadium on April 20, 2008. We were thrilled! I had always wanted to experience a Papal Mass in person but had missed the opportunity to go to World Youth Day in Denver, Colorado and to go to Pope John Paul II’s Mass in Central Park. It seemed like this third opportunity was a charm.

For most of Saturday, I flitted around the house preparing for the next day. I selected my outfit, packed my purse, and readied our camera. I finished reading the Pope’s encyclical, “Spe Salvi”, and I prayed for our safety and for God’s help at such a large event. When I finished, I felt ready and excited to go.

The morning of the event, we met our bus at 7:00 am. It was chilly and misty, but in keeping with the theme of the day, we hoped that it would warm up and clear off.

It took a little over an hour to get to Yankee Stadium from our meeting point in Trumbull, Connecticut. It was a good opportunity to pray the Rosary and ask for some added help. We parked the bus in Lot 16 and proceeded to walk several long city blocks to the stadium. We went



through security quickly and smoothly. Once inside, we were handed our packets of goodies – an emergency rain poncho, copies of Catholic Digest and Magnificat, a commemorative edition of the Gospel of St. Luke, a prayer card, various inserts indicating where we could get information on items of interest such as becoming a priest, and a neatly pressed white or gold cloth like the ones I had seen so many others wave at the Holy Father that week. On our way to our seats, we caught glimpses from the stairwells of the vibrant white, gold, and purple that colored the stadium. Our excitement continued to mount as we reached our seats in the front row of the second tier Loge Box directly behind third base. We had a direct line of sight to the altar and the Pope’s chair. What an awesome view! As a person slightly over five feet tall, it was nice to have an unobstructed area in front of me for such an important event.

I snapped some pictures of the white diamond-shaped stage edged in gold and purple. White and yellow flowers lined the steps in front of the altar. Long purple drapes wound around the scaffolding that held up the canopy above the altar and on that canopy sat enormous gold-colored speakers that blared music. The workers were out on the field removing the coverings on the white and gold tapestries that stretched from the Papal Seal over the pitcher's mound out to the edges of the stage. Clean white chairs sat in straight lines near first and third bases for concelebrating priests. And the large white chair adorned with a gold cross that the Holy Father himself would sit in was above second base. It was beautiful and I was in a wonderful mood.

But, as I learned, pilgrimages are not for the faint of heart and a wonderful mood can quickly turn sour. Lines for the ladies' restrooms, for food, and for souvenirs stretched lengthily down the corridors of our level of the stadium. Depending on which line you were in, the wait could be anywhere from 20 minutes to 2 hours. Most of the first three hours of our time was spent in these various lines.

It was very frustrating.

When we finally returned to our seats, we listened to the "Concert of Hope". Performers like Dana, Ronan Tynan, Jose Feliciano, Stephanie Mills, and Harry Connick, Jr.



were interspersed with various choirs. The last performance, Benoit Jutros, included people of various ages carrying kite-like fabric doves on long wires. They made the doves swoop and soar around the field. At the end of their performance, real doves were released into the air which flew around the upper deck. The concert helped me refocus and much of my excitement returned.

At last, the Pope arrived! The Popemobile made its way slowly from the outfield down the third base line right below us. We cheered and waved and clicked photos. Finally, I was seeing the Pope in person! He entered the dugout behind home plate to vest for Mass. Soon he reappeared in ornate cream and gold-colored vestments following a long procession of priests. The opening song was mixed with cheers and applause.

As the procession ended, the Pope spoke, and silence fell over the crowd. “In the Name of the Father,” he began, “and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” A resoundingly loud, clear “AMEN” reverberated through the stadium – the awe-inspiring sound of over 50,000 voices responding with one affirmative word. It was a beautiful, faith filled sound, and it gave a sense of the sheer number of people in the stands. It was mind boggling to think that this was only a small segment of the Communion of Saints.

The Holy Father’s Homily was inspiring. He talked about “never losing sight of the Great Hope which gives meaning and value to all the other hopes which inspire our lives.”

In the section of the stadium directly below us sat a large group of priests in white albs, Knights of Columbus with their multicolored hat plumes, and a group of navy-blue uniformed police officers.



They were an extension of the vibrant colors on the field. In front of these groups stood a table crowded with stacks of round, neatly polished, gold ciboria. Then, as we were coming to the

consecration, these priests exited their seats. Each was handed one of the shiny ciboria by a neatly uniformed officer. The priests proceeded up the ramps at either side of the stage and the Holy Father began the consecration of the tens of thousands of hosts contained in those vessels to feed the hungry pilgrims.

Soon, I was given the ultimate reminder of why we were there. As the Holy Father raised the Eucharist above his head for all to see, The True Star, the Sacred Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ, was there before us. The Eucharist was lowered back onto the altar. Then, with great humility, the Holy Father genuflected before the Eucharist and all those multitude of priests bowed in unison where they stood. It was a powerful witness showing, appropriately, that everyone there was but a servant to the Lord. I felt embarrassed by my earlier

frustrations and thankful that I could share in this sacred moment. But even though this was a unique, wonderful, humbling experience, it was also a comfortingly familiar one. As I recognized Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, I realized that this was the same Jesus I encounter at every Mass no matter the celebrant or location. Celebrating Mass with Pope Benedict was an awesome, once-in-a-lifetime experience. But, thankfully, encountering Jesus at this Mass was the same awesome experience I can celebrate regularly in my life. How blessed Our Church is that Christ Our Hope is so present to us.

When Mass was over and we'd waved our farewells to the Holy Father, we made our way back to the bus. Again, the crowds were thick, and the walk was long. But this time, in the chaos, I felt happy and lighter. Now strengthened by Christ Our Hope, I didn't fall prey to the same frustration of the earlier lines. Instead, I exchanged words of encouragement with those young and old who walked the long distance with us. This time, instead of irritability in the crowd, I felt much more like we were all pilgrims on a journey – not only the journey back to the buses, but on the journey to heaven.



One lady was walking with her grandson. He looked about 3 years old and was dressed in a dapper blue suit, white shirt, and red tie. I commented to the lady that I thought he was a trooper making that walk. With a wink, she said he was helping his grandma. What an appropriate image of hope for the future with which to end a memorable day.

Author's note: The above article was originally written in 2008 after Pope Benedict XVI visited America. With his passing from this life on December 31, 2022, it seemed fitting to finally publish it. Pope Benedict XVI was a holy man, a wonderful pontiff, and a person of great faith and intelligence. Our Church was blessed to have him. I pray that he is in heaven this day. Thank you, Pope Benedict XVI for everything.