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Did pope approve of American mass?

It was clear from the start of the papal mass in Nationals Park Thursday that the event would be a truly American Catholic celebration. Prayers and readings were delivered in a number of languages. And the gifts and Eucharist were accompanied by musical arrangements with Native American and Gospel flavor. But was Pope Benedict XVI pleased?

Rev. Richard Neuhaus, editor of First Things magazine, said he thinks the "liturgical and musical stew" probably "tried Benedict's patience a good deal." A pundit for EWTN, which broadcasted the mass in its entirety, Neuhaus called the mass an example of "preening multicultural exhibitionism" and "a great mish mash of almost everything."

But Rev. Jeremiah Boland, pastor of Holy Family Catholic Church on Chicago's near West Side, thought the **mass was a vibrant reflection of American culture.**

"I think this being the capital of the country and this being the national mass by its nature, it wanted to reflect the cultural diversity of the United States," Boland told me by phone as he waited inside the stadium after helping to celebrate mass with the pope. "The mass ... was one of the most beautiful I've ever been at."

Boland started his day at 7:30 a.m. hearing confessions at Nationals Park. Wearing a white alb and red stole, Boland was seated near the main altar where he had a clear view of Pope Benedict.

"The pope is such a prayerful person," Boland said. "You have a 46,000 people in the stadium. I can't imagine maintaining a sense of solemnity. He really led the prayer so beautifully ... He spoke so much from the heart and directly about things."

Boland was impressed that Pope Benedict expressed concern about the impact of the sex abuse crisis for the third time during his visit. "For a lot of people wondering 'Does he get it? Does he understand?' it would be pretty hard to say he doesn't," Boland said. He was also moved that the pope spoke about other wounds in the nation's history including the treatment of Native Americans and African-Americans. "This is a land of hope but, for some, hope has been denied them," Boland said.

"Americans are just starting to get to know Pope Benedict," he added. "I think these events are very important for people at home watching on television ... helping them get a sense of the extraordinary gifts this pope has."

Halfway through the mass, Rev. Dennis H. Holtschneider, president of DePaul University, was asked to provide a commentary on the mass on the stadium's giant screen for parishioners to watch as they filed out of the stadium.

Holtschneider said he did not think the pope was the least bit uncomfortable with the array of cultural traditions on display at the mass. In fact, Holtschneider said, in his homily the pope commended America for "knitting together these vast immigrant groups into one really powerful church."

Both Boland and Holtschneider said the most moving moment for them took place before the mass even began. When Pope Benedict entered the stadium in the popemobile, he arrived to great cheers. But as he began to walk toward the altar, the stadium fell silent except for one single soprano voice singing "We are one."

Boland described the feeling as "euphoric."

Holtschneider agreed.

"To look around the whole stadium and see this great variety of people and hear those words and to see him walking forward," he said. "I had chills."

About this blog


The Seeker is all about why I became a religion writer in the first place. On a professional level, I am on a constant quest for truth. And on a personal level, I am on a quest for Truth--with a capital T.

There is no greater privilege than to be on the receiving end when people not only answer my questions honestly, but share what they believe to be the ultimate truth about where we come from, why we are here and where we go in the end.

With this blog, I'd like to let you in on those conversations and engage in your own discussions so we can all seek together.

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