

Vignettes from the beatification of John Paul II

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 2, 2011 NCR Today

ROME --tMassive events such as the beatification of Pope John Paul II on Sunday, which is now estimated to have drawn up to a million and a half people to Rome, are in one sense mosaics composed of countless individual experiences.

tHere are three "reporter's notebook"-style vignettes from the sidelines of the beatification. They don't add up to a grand storyline, but they do provide a few bits of flavor from what was a remarkable week in Rome.

Three words that saved a life

tPlenty of people who met John Paul II over the course of his life, or who worked with him in various capacities, were on hand in Rome to celebrate the pope's beatification, and to reminisce.

tBishop Richard Stika of Knoxville, Tennessee, for instance, was the main organizer of John Paul's Jan. 26-27, 1999, trip to St. Louis. I had the chance to sit down with Stika on Saturday, and he gave me some insider detail on the best-known storyline from that 1999 St. Louis visit: John Paul's request for clemency for convicted killer Darrell Mease, which saved Mease from the death penalty.

tBack in 1988, Mease killed a former drug partner, along with his wife and grandson. Mease was convicted of the crime and sentenced to die by lethal injection, coincidentally on the same day John Paul was to be in St. Louis. To save embarrassment, the Missouri Supreme Court had delayed the execution until early February.

tWhen the papal plane landed at Lambert International Airport on January 26, the Secretary of State, at the time Italian Cardinal Angelo Sodano, asked Stika if a meeting could be arranged for him with Missouri Governor Mel Carnahan to make a plea for clemency. As the papal party was preparing to leave for a youth event at the Kiel Center, Stika found himself on his cell phone trying desperately to reach the governor's office.

tThe next day, Carnahan met Sodano at the residence of the Archbishop of St. Louis. Sodano relayed the pope's request. Carnahan, Stika said, left the meeting promising to think about it, but nothing more.

tThat evening, Carnahan attended a vigil service at the Cathedral of St. Louis led by the pope. As John Paul was exiting afterwards, Stika said, he was introduced to Carnahan. As Stika tells the story, John Paul put his arm on the governor's hand and uttered just three words: "Mercy for Mease!?"

tThat encounter, apparently, put Carnahan over the top. He commuted Mease's sentence to life in prison, and Mease remains in a Missouri prison today. (In a tragic footnote, Carnahan died in a plane crash one year later.)

tStika said that Carnahan later told him, "If John Paul had asked me to stay all executions in Missouri, I couldn't have done it. But he asked me to stay just one, and since it came from a man who even forgave the guy who shot him, I had to do it."

In a sense, one could say that all it took was three words from John Paul II to save a man's life. "Moral authority" may be a hard concept to define, but if you want to see it in action, you'll rarely get a better example.

Saints and Royals

Pilgrims in Rome this week worried a bit about the weather on Sunday, since Saturday had brought cold, rain and gloom. Journalists were worried about the climate too, but in this case the media climate.

In particular, there was concern that buzz about Friday's royal wedding in the U.K. might overshadow coverage of the beatification, especially in the English-language media. (The BBC, for instance, didn't send anyone to Rome for the beatification since their resources were exhausted from saturation coverage of the wedding.)

In the end, the good weather, gorgeous images, and even-better-than-expected crowd on Sunday guaranteed substantial media interest, ensuring the TV personalities got their air time and print people got their column inches.

I provided color commentary for CNN during the Mass, from a TV platform erected by Castel Sant'Angelo, at the end of the Via della Conciliazione that feeds into St. Peter's Square. Just above us was the NBC/MSNBC location, where George Weigel and Fr. Bob Barron were doing color, and right next to us was the Sky location, where American Fr. Thomas Williams, a member of the Legionaries of Christ based in Rome, was their analyst. (Every TV network needs an in-house Vaticanologist, just like they grab up retired generals, economists, etc., to deliver analysis on those beats.)

In the meantime, there's a weird connection between Catholic saints and British royals that somebody needs to explain.

Consider:

- Princess Diana and Mother Teresa died within a week of each other in the summer of 1997. Diana's funeral took place on the day Mother Teresa died.
- In April 2005, the wedding of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles had to be delayed one day so as not to conflict with the funeral Mass of Pope John Paul II.
- This week, Prince William and Kate Middleton were married two days before the beatification of John Paul II.

I'm not sure what to make of all that, especially given the checkered history of relations between the British monarchy and the Vatican. I do know, however, that if I were a member of the royal family in England thinking about scheduling a major event, I'd check the Vatican's calendar first.

In search of Navarro-Valls

One of the most sought-after interview subjects in Rome this week was Joaquin Navarro-Valls, the former spokesperson of John Paul II. Everybody wanted a piece of him, in part because he was one of John Paul's closest collaborators, and in part because he's great with the media.

I know Navarro-Valls reasonably well, and appealed to him to give us a break. He agreed to give us a few minutes prior to a vigil service on Saturday night where he was to speak, but the trick was that we had to travel

out to Rome's Circus Maximus to do the interview. As it happened, CNN's Jim Bitterman, the veteran correspondent assigned to the beatification, was doing live shots that night and couldn't go out, so I was tapped.

For the first (and probably only) time in my life, I got to pretend I was more than an analyst and commentator, but an honest-to-God TV reporter. With a cameraman and producer at my side, I put Navarro-Valls through his paces, trying to come up with good TV questions.

Here's a sampling of our exchange:

Q: Why was John Paul II a saint?

One of the things that I quite often remember of him is the good humor. When you are 17 years old, to have with humor, it's an obligation. It's biology. At 40, with some problems at home, with wife, children or the place you work, it's more difficult. When you are 80, full of responsibilities, to keep good humor is sanctity to me.

Can you give us a favorite personal memory?

It's very difficult after more than 20 years with him just to pick something. I remember when my father died. He was rather old. Some days before, the Holy Father knew that and said, well, go and stay with him the last days. I took my mother back home after it happened, and some minutes later the telephone rang. I picked it up and it was the Pope. The nice thing was that the first question he put, a very sensible question in that moment, was how is your mother? Not how are you? But how is your mother doing?

Do you think this has been too fast?

No. Some people have asked me a question from the historical point of view. Well, this is not a historical judgment. Once the virtues are clear, why wait? The historical judgment is different. It might take centuries. But to be aware, to know well the Christian virtues in his life, which is what beatification is all about, that's clear.

When you worked with him, did you believe that you were in the presence of a saint?

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Even in some occasions, I had to tell myself, Navarro, please, you are talking with the Pope. Because it was so informal in the way in which you can work and interact with him. But just seeing him, the way he prayed was very clear in your mind that you were talking to a saint. Nothing extraordinary, but fully believing that this man was speaking to God, talking to God, having a nice conversation with God.

Is he going to be remembered as 'John Paul the Great'?

I agree with that from an historical point of view. And I think I've been privileged enough to have been with him. For instance, the ten years between '79 and '89, the ten years that changed the life of hundreds of millions of people in Central and Eastern Europe, or the big changes in Latin America. He went to Chile and sometime after that, Pinochet was out. He was in Congo for the change, et cetera. So, [he helped bring about] big changes from the historic point of view. That is why, I think, that it's quite appropriate to call him John Paul the Great, no doubt.

Of course, I also asked Navarro-Valls about criticism of John Paul's record on the sexual abuse crisis. He began by expressing amusement that many people who don't ordinarily take an interest in saints suddenly seem to be experts on who deserves to be beatified. Beyond that, Navarro-Valls insisted, John Paul acted when he had

specific information. On the case of Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, Navarro-Valls argued that an investigation actually began under John Paul II, even though it didn't reach conclusion until the papacy of Benedict XVI.

tCNN aired the interview with Navarro-Valls more or less in its entirety during coverage of the beatification Mass. After it was over, host Jonathan Mann referred to it as a "very colloquial conversation," though in retrospect I'm not sure if he was referring to Navarro-Valls' openness or my lack of TV poise!

tAs a footnote, after the interview with Navarro-Valls, the three of us on hand from CNN had the chance to meet Sr. Marie Simon-Pierre Normand, the 49-year-old French nun whose recovery from Parkinson's disease was recognized by the Vatican as the miracle that paved the way for John Paul's beatification. She was in a small trailer behind the stage for the vigil, accompanied by several members of her order (the *Institut des Petites Soeurs des Maternités Catholiques*, or "Institute of the Little Sisters of Catholic Motherhood").

tWhile I'm no expert on the miraculous, I can at least say that Sr. Normand seemed hale and healthy, continuing to show no signs of the aggressive form of Parkinson's disease that afflicted her until she reported being cured on June 3, 2005.

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