

Reflections from the water's edge: canonizations in perspective

William T. Ditewig | May. 5, 2014

Papal canonizations

Rome

I know what you're probably thinking: "No, not another item on the canonizations!"

But I'm not writing now about the theological, political or even sociological import of the recent canonizations of Sts. John XXIII and John Paul II on April 27. Others have already analyzed the event, its pros and cons, and these conversations certainly need to continue. However, what I want to do is much simpler. When all is said and done, what was it like to be in that crowd, ministering to the people, especially those who were farthest away?

For a variety of reasons, I was asked to assist with the distribution of Communion during the Mass of canonization. I was excited, of course, but also a little nervous. I've been asked before, and sometimes something unexpected would come up at the last minute to throw the whole thing off. So I was cautiously excited about this opportunity.

Something else struck me from the very start. This was going to be the largest Mass I'd ever attended, and who knew exactly where we'd be assigned to distribute Communion?

I decided that I wanted to take Pope Francis' repeated direction to serve on the fringes of society. What better way to do that than to request a position away from St. Peter's Square? My request was granted, and I was assigned to a group of priests and deacons who would assemble at the church of Santa Maria in Traspontina along the Via della Conciliazione, heading away from St. Peter's and toward the Tiber to serve.

The day began early, of course, and we were told to be in the parking lot of St. John Lateran in time to catch the first of eight buses leaving at 5 a.m. for the Vatican. Just to be sure, I was there before 4 a.m., in case plans changed. As we loaded the buses, I joined a group of Polish priests along with part of the Vatican choir. Interesting conversations along the route! By the way, this is the only way to travel in Rome: escorted the entire route by *Carabinieri* clearing the way. We made it to the Vatican in record time, I'm sure.

After getting off the bus, we were formed in our various groups and given additional credentials to participate in the Mass. Then, by foot, we were escorted from the "Holy Office" area around the perimeter of Bernini's famous colonnade, and into the Via della Conciliazione. What a sight greeted us there! Officials had positioned waist-high barricades across the entire street, and people were packed in behind those barricades the entire length and breadth of the street and all of its tributaries.

There was a small "aisle" down the middle being used for emergency support teams, and even at this early hour, they were assisting a number of people. We were led down this aisle until we got to the front of the church. There, we had to wait while officials figured out a way to get us (about 200 of us, all told) from the middle of the street and into the church. Eventually, after a half hour of gesticulations, shouting, and talking on walkie-talkies and cellphones, that was all worked out and in we went.

The next few hours, waiting for the papal Mass to begin in the Piazza San Pietro, were surreal, but blessed. Here we were, just a few feet from that vast crowd of pilgrims, some of them singing softly, some increasingly distressed by the press of the crowd itself, and all wanting to be a part of things and to get as close as they could. We were inside a quiet, darkened, beautiful church, and we joined in prayer for the people. After morning prayer led by the pastor and clergy of the parish, we celebrated Mass at 8 a.m., during which the hosts we would be distributing later were consecrated. Ciboria-filled tables flanked the sanctuary.

When our Mass was over, a screen was set up so we could follow the papal Mass. This was not simply out of curiosity; our own movements would be timed to those of the Holy Father. Immediately following the consecration, we were invited to vest in our albs and stoles, and then we processed, two by two, into the sanctuary to take up a ciborium, then continued our procession, lining up facing the front doors of the church.

As the Lord's Prayer began, the doors opened and we processed into the street, turning to the left, away from St. Peter's and in the direction of the Tiber. Every 10 meters or so, two of us would drop out of procession and take positions facing the assembly. I was at the end of the line, so I got to go the farthest, finally taking up a position along a street aptly named after Pope, now Saint, John XXIII. As Pope Francis began distribution of Communion at the main altar, we immediately began our own distribution to the people.

Words cannot describe the power of the moment. I saw later that the priests distributing Communion near the papal altar had attendants carrying umbrellas over them; we had no such niceties. Our attendants were *Carabinieri* working crowd control, but now helping to get people positioned to receive Communion. The assembly was orderly, but anxious to receive. For the most part, people were as reverent as if they were in their parish churches at home. To see the eagerness, the joy, the looks on their faces that said, "This will all be worthwhile if I can just receive Communion," when all along they thought they were "stuck" along the fringes with no way to participate in what was going on at the other end of the street. Yet here they were, receiving the body and blood of Christ right where they were, in life and at that Mass.

As Communion was finishing in the Piazza, so too were we. As far as I could tell, all who had wanted to receive Communion along the route were able to do so, and it was such a privilege to be a part of that. We returned to the church, took off our vestments, and after the pope's final blessing, we were escorted out a back door of the church and returned to the streets.

I know there are many issues surrounding these, or indeed, any canonizations. As a theologian myself, I've participated in many of them. We can and must debate those issues. But for a few moments that Sunday, in the midst of all the apparent chaos, I experienced the blessing of serving, touching and ministering to people from around world who had only one thing on their minds and in their hearts: to be a part of this larger communion we call church, at a very special time in its history. It is a blessing I now want to carry to the people who were not able to be here, both inside and outside the church.

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