

HERALD OF HOPE



Church is alive; church is young

Archbishop
Timothy M. Dolan

This might be a bit rambling and disjointed, as I write it “jet-lagged” late Monday night after returning from eight inspiring days in Germany for World Youth Day.

Exhilarating; hopeful; fun; uplifting; exhausting; binding; prayerful; enlightening — all words that come to mind as I reflect on a blessed week in company with 700 brother bishops, 10,000 priests, 6,000 seminarians, 11,000 women religious, 85,000 lay pastoral leaders, 800,000 young people from 141 countries — and one pope!

At the homily during the Mass on April 19, 2005, when he began his petrine ministry, remember how Pope Benedict XVI exclaimed, “The church is alive! The church is young!” While not an infallible statement, he sure was right, and last week was all the evidence I needed.

Rather than attempt a narrative of my impressions, why not

share with you some “snapshots” that will linger in my memory bank for a long time?

■ Falling asleep exhausted each night to the serenade of thousands of young people in the square outside our pension in Cologne, all singing, “Jesus Christ, You are my life!” or chanting “Be-ne-det-to!” (Benedict);

■ Noticing from my room window late one night how the young people, patiently awaiting their trains, began to help the street-sweepers and garbage collectors in their work;

■ Seeing a long line of hundreds of youth patiently waiting to enter — not a GAP store, theater, or computer game arcade — but the Church of St. Martin where the Blessed Sacrament was exposed for adoration;

■ Attending a meeting of thousands of our youth who sat in heartfelt interest as Jewish and Islamic scholars explained the essentials of their faiths, and

shared hope for more intense inter-religious dialogue;

■ Hearing hours of confessions of young people genuinely attuned to the challenge of the Gospel, who had heard Christ’s “call to conversion” at World Youth Day;

■ Being moved to tears as our bus passed thousands-upon-thousands of chanting youth walking the 12 miles from Cologne to Marienfeld, the site of the vigil and Eucharist with the Holy Father, among them a 19-year old cancer survivor, who had lost a leg in the struggle, on her crutches grasping her sleeping bag, knapsack on her back, never losing her smile;

■ Watching the throng welcome the shy, smiling, reserved Pope Benedict, who spoke to the million people from his heart, with simplicity and sincerity;

■ Cheering with the church full of youth at one of my catechetical sessions as, during the dialogue after my teaching, a 26-year-old graduate student from Austin, Texas, nervously approached the microphone: “Archbishop Dolan, you spoke of conversion, commitment, fidelity, letting Christ change us. Well, I’d like to ask my girlfriend, Catherine, if she would come up here.” Up she came ... “Catherine, will you marry me?”;

■ Introducing at each of my catechetical sessions, brother bishops, priests, deacons, and lay pastoral ministers, all of whom were warmly cheered; but

so happy when the youthful congregation saved its most exuberant cheer for the seminarians, novices, and postulants;

■ Watching as hundreds of youth from the “first world” conversed for three hours with African young people, listening attentively as the third-worlders eloquently described the conditions of church and society in Africa;

■ Observing a fundamentalist protester in front of Cologne’s majestic cathedral, who, thinking he would be taunting and insulting the throng of Catholic youth with his chant that “Jesus is Lord!” looked bewildered as the huge square erupted with cheers of agreement with him;

■ Marveling at the silent reverence of a candlelight vigil of prayer for Br. Roger, the murdered ecumenical leader from the Taizé monastic community in France;

■ Running through a down-pour, being stopped by a German on the sidewalk, who insisted I take his umbrella;

Well, I could go on and on, and probably will continue gushing in the months ahead. I was so proud of our 265 young people, their priest and lay guides, from the archdiocese, who, I am confident, will back-me up in the “A+” I gave our experience.

By the way, Catherine said “yes” to Chris’ proposal; hundreds of thousands of young people said “yes” to the invitation of Jesus to “follow me,” in Germany last week.