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Minnesota's First District
Agriculture, Government Reform
and Science Committees



“Reflections from Rome”

By Gil Gutknecht

The air was soft on that perfect, late spring morning. Throngs of people, from every corner of the world, were gathering. There were priests and presidents, royals and regular folks...all drawn to St. Peter's Square.

I felt blessed just to be among them. We were there to pay our respects and celebrate a painful passing. History is biography. The life of Pope John Paul II is history writ large. Lucky are those who live in times with wise and moral leaders. We were all blessed. This was a Pope we had come to love and admire.

An estimated two million Poles made the pilgrimage to Rome. They saw his greatness first. Hundreds of Polish flags adorned with black ribbons flashed in the huge crowd whenever applause was appropriate. A few Solidarity banners reminded the world of the courage of this Pope. One elderly Polish lady said she had driven ten hours to say one last thank you to the man who helped free her people.

The ceremony lasted nearly three hours, but it did not seem long. Kneeling on cobblestone during the mass did. Smelling the incense, witnessing the pomp and circumstance would have been more than enough. But there was more.

As we boarded our bus early in the morning for the Vatican, a handsome young man, vaguely familiar, was standing in the parking lot. One of my colleagues said, “That’s Jim Caviezel, the star of Mel Gibson’s ‘The Passion of the Christ!’”

Against staggering odds, the man who played Jesus wound up sitting just in front of me in that huge crowd. He was eager to talk about the history of that holy place. I was happy to listen.

He pointed out the statue of Cassius. He told of the piercing of Christ with the spear, his conversion and martyrdom. He talked with reverence of John Paul II and the Pontiff’s love for the Blessed Virgin as he pointed us toward the only representation of Mary in the square.

In the 40 minutes before the ceremony began, he made it clear he loved to share what he had learned preparing for the part of a lifetime. He quoted several long passages of Christ in Aramaic and then told us exactly what they meant. His steely blue eyes emphasized these were much more than memorized lines for a movie. I wondered whether Mel Gibson chose him for the part, or was he merely an instrument in the decision.

He filled in blanks about St. Peter's life. He pointed to the obelisk that was originally part of the Roman Coliseum and told how it played a role in the drama that culminated in Peter's crucifixion. How he was buried in the rock that became the bedrock of the great basilica. And how his bones are still kept under the altar.

The mood at the service itself was somber but not sad. It was much more a celebration of a great man's life; one who had been called home to glory. I found some things ironic. At the center of this elaborate Latin ceremony with colorful vestments, cardinals and kings, was a very plain wooden box containing the mortal remains of one of the world's most influential people.

The most emotional part of the ceremony came at the end, when the casket was slowly taken back into the basilica. I choked back tears as the pall bearers tilted the casket back toward us, exposing the simple cross on top. It was as if he was giving us one last blessing. The massive crowd roared. Many waived a final goodbye.

I left for Rome troubled. I wondered about a world without Pope John Paul II's wise and compassionate presence. For more than a quarter of a century he took up his cross daily and led his massive flock. He was a calming constant in a turbulent, changing world. Now he was gone.

He told us, "Following the path of truth is often difficult, but never impossible." He set out to change men's hearts and in the process, like St. Peter before him, he left a changed world. I returned from Rome refreshed, reminded of the words he used when he began his Papacy: "Be not afraid."

I thank God for giving us Karol Wojtyla.

Gutknecht represents Minnesota's First District in the U.S. House of Representatives. He attended Pope John Paul II's funeral as part of the U.S. Congressional delegation at the invitation of U.S. House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert.