

John Paul II Shrine: August 2019 Guild Meeting Notes

Ken Balubuenta welcomed our August meeting at Saint John Paul II National Shrine. As well as a Guild guide, he is the Shrine's Director of Pilgrimage and Visitor Services. Some of us may remember the John Paul II Cultural Center which opened on this site in 2001. Pope John Paul II had to choose between Rome, Poland and DC.

There was hope that DC would be the platform for diffusing his messages of inter-faith reconciliation and human dignity. President Bush and Pope Benedict visited. There is a special chair in which the popes sat. There were also interactive display . . . which became one of the reasons the Cultural Center failed. They just were not reliable.

The Center also charged admission, and just did not have a strong identity. Those three reasons led to the purchase of the facility by the Knights of Columbus in 2011. They are a national Catholic fraternal benefit society, with three types of resources. Their museum in New Haven, CT, held many of the artifacts now on display in the museum, they have wide financial support, and they have influence at the Vatican. In 2014 the building was officially dedicated a Shrine by the Catholic Church, and designated a destination for Pilgrimage, a journey that confers special grace on Pilgrims.

The only spaces remaining from the old Cultural Center are the auditorium, and the building itself. Well, that is not exactly true. The Redeptor Hominus church was expanded.

The church is named for the John Paul II's first 'encyclical', a statement of Church doctrine. Redeptor Hominus is Latin for 'Redeemer of Humankind', and addresses the problems of the time, 1979. John Paul II's promoted a philosophy of 'personalism', which seeks a deeper understating of both Jesus and other people.

The Chapel is the first of two spaces decorated with mosaics created by Jesuit Father Marco Rupnik. Sculptor Edoardo Ferrari, and artists from the Centro Aletti religious community in Rome. It is deliberately difficult to read the inscription on the outer wall. What can be read at a glance can be forgotten in an instant.

Entering the chapel, one might notice that the pillars are unbalanced. There are four pillars across, and the ones on the right side are thicker, and decorated with mosaics of saints. If one recalls that the Latin for left is the root of 'sinister', it is easy to remember that the mosaics on the left represent the Fall of mankind, while those on the right chronicle salvation. The daily Sacred Art tour, at one pm or by appointment, can be as brief as 45 minutes, but most will go longer. One amusing anecdote. On the left side, there is a mosaic depicting the construction of the Tower of Babel. The artists were running short of tiles, so they went to Home Depot and purchased some shower tiles. The workers building the Tower are carrying 'blocks' made of these tiles. One can't see their faces because they are block heads.

A detailed explanation of the church mosaics can be found in the May 2016 issue of the Knights' magazine, "Columba", distributed at the Shrine. Mass is available at noon Monday through Saturday. Sundays a Spanish mass is offered at 11, and English masses at two and seven pm. Occasionally, the Church hosts special masses such as weddings. It is usually open to visitors during normal operation hours, 10-5.

The Luminous Mysteries Chapel is the other space adorned with mosaics. It alludes to the Rosary, the Catholic version of prayer beads. Many faiths use them to meditate and reflect. The Catholic church

had two sets of 'Mysteries' for prayerful contemplation: the Joyful and the Sorrowful. In keeping with his philosophy of Personhood, John Paul II added five mysteries which shed light on Jesus, thus the Luminous Mysteries. One, for example, is the famous Wedding Feast where Catholics believe that Jesus turned water into wine.

The Chapel includes a 'first-degree relic', a physical part of a saint, like a lock of hair. In this case, there is a vial of John Paul II's blood.

How did a blood sample end up by an altar in DC? One of John Paul's assistants, Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz, had a feeling that the Pope was destined for yet greater things, so he saved a few vials of blood drawn for medical tests. Our sample is enclosed a glass vial mounted in a copy of a staff. One can touch it, and touch something to it.

If, for example, a couple touches their wedding rings to the vial, the rings become 'third-degree relics'. In fact, anything touching a first or second degree relic (something owned and touched by the saint) becomes sacred. One need pay attention though. Balbuena recounted how he once touched a lottery ticket to the first degree relic. He did win . . . but only one dollar. Someone has a sense of humor.

The lower level includes a cafeteria which is open to anyone who wants to, say, bring in box lunches. The Shrine also works with catering companies (one of which provided us a good lunch after the meeting). There is a gift shop, of course, And then-- the exhibit on John Paul II's life.

As at the FDR memorial, visitors walk through crucial events of the Twentieth Century. Karol Józef Wojtyła was born in Poland in 1920, surviving the early deaths of his parents, the Depression, WWII, and the communist occupation of his country. He was an avid athlete and skier, a playwright, a philosophy professor, and eventually a priest, bishop, and the Pope during Poland's Solidarity labor movement. Many credit him with helping to topple Communism by giving the Polish people hope and strength.

Continuing through the exhibit, one sees his work as a bridge builder (the literal translation of 'Pontiff'). He had time: he served for 26 ½ years, from 1978 through 2005. He was the first non-Italian pope in 455 years, As the Church reached out beyond Italy, so did John Paul II. He traveled to 129 different countries, and met with leaders of many faiths. He visited the U.S. seven times. His spiritual goal was called New Evangelization, bringing people back to the Church. There are artifacts from all around the world, including a cross from World Youth Day, founded by John Paul II in 1985. There is an international gathering festival every two years. The cross travels among local Youth Days around the world.

The Shrine has a two-part mission, to preserve John Paul II's legacy, and to help people incorporate his teachings into their daily lives. "This pope showed you how to love people . . . he could love in the hundreds of thousands and he could love them individually," a pilgrim noted. "I have looked to you and you have come to me," said the Pope.

There are two brochures offered: Plan your Pilgrimage and Plan your Visit. The Shrine, like the Bible Museum, is appropriate for everyone, since it focuses on universal love and connection. The historical exhibit, is by Gallagher & Associates, who designed the new Spy Museum as well as the New Orleans' World War II Museum. It recounts history through John Paul II's eyes. While it does evoke a spiritual awareness, like the Pope it welcomes all traditions. It also accommodates diverse learning styles-- visual, kinesthetic, auditory—with interactive exhibits. There is even a twitter account. When the

Caps won, the Shrine tweeted out a photo of the Pope's red robe and shoes, noting that John Paul II knew how to rock the red.

Like the Basilica, the Shrine welcomes visitors with bus parking, and there will soon be a drivers' lounge. One could walk the half-mile between the sites, though there is no crosswalk directly in front of the Shrine. They recommend at least 24 hours notice, but understand that sometime one must take advantage of extra time to add something new to the itinerary. The only time this might not work would be January, where the Shrine hosts hoards of young pilgrims to the March for Life. (In 2020, gatherings will be January 20-26, with the actual march on Jan 23).

Visitors are a diverse lot. School groups accounted for 39%; Church Groups, 15%; Knights of Columbus, 5%. The "other" category: 41%. This year, the Shrine expects to top 2017's peak of 64,000 visitors. You will find your group more than welcome. More information at jp2shrine.org.