

Choreographing The Spectacular And the Sublime

By Gerald A. Regan

BASED ON MY preview of the arrangements, the Pope's Central Park mass tomorrow morning will offer both the sublime and the spectacular.

Witness: About 120,000 of the region's faithful, including hundreds of the rich and powerful, will pack into the park's Great Lawn. An array of 800 priests will attempt to distribute 120,000 communion wafers in a timed 22 minutes.

The papal stage, nearly 300 feet wide, sat fortress-like on the Great Lawn Wednesday night — bathed in floodlights, resembling some sort of supernatural vision. The stage's side panels soared skyward, festooned with gold and blue crosses. It was, in a word, breathtaking.

I am one of an anticipated army of 1,000 volunteers — ticket-takers, ushers and information providers — expected to help keep order amid the anticipated chaos attending tomorrow morning's mass. At a Wednesday night briefing from the event's self-styled "producer" and the Secret Service, we were told: Gate crashers — even priests or those dressed like them — will be sent packing.

When the Pope was last in the United States in 1993, a Secret Service agent told us, costume shops sold out of priests' garb. "If they're wearing a collar, it doesn't necessarily mean they're priests," the agent said.

Cadets from SUNY Maritime College at Fort Schuyler were designated as the ticket takers. "The military presence is probably the best thing that we can have out there," a planning official said.

An expanse of seats and sea of roped-in areas spread for hundreds of yards around the stage. Here, those 120,000 ticket holders will see the Pope.

We volunteers must arise early enough to get to the Great Lawn for our 3 a.m. call, although the mass starts at 9:30. This is a sacrifice for someone who hates to arise before dawn. But it will be worth it. The hoopla and trappings of the event beckon, but obviously I am drawn most by the opportunity to see the Pope.

I am a lifelong Catholic, and take issue with some of the Pope's views. For example, I think we need women as priests and believe priests should be allowed to marry, as they were many centuries ago. I own condoms.

Still, the Pope is one of our very few living saints and a towering and inspiring figure.

I have little doubt in my mind and heart that I behold an extraordinary life. His example, traveling the world as a pilgrim for faith, speaking out against the moral lapses of nations and leaders, brings meaning and hope to my life.

The world is his parish, and his refreshing vigor and ecumenism fill me with a sense that we are one, and that what unites us all is far more powerful than what divides us. From his high-profile pulpit, he speaks to us as the conscience of the world.

I want to hear his words directly, unfiltered by the media, and hope they somehow may take root in my heart. I think this is what will drive me from my bed at 1 a.m. tomorrow.



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