



A Gift and a Grace

by Fr. Kevin O'Connell, SJ

A Jesuit witnessed Benedict XVI's visit to Jordan in May

New Englander Fr. Kevin O'Connell, SJ, is the founding pastor of Sacred Heart, an English-language parish in Amman, Jordan, that serves English-speaking Catholics in Jordan, including workers from the Philippines and Sri Lanka, and Jordanian Catholics who wish to worship in English. He and many parishioners witnessed the historic visit of Pope Benedict XVI last May.

LOCAL CHRISTIANS were pretty excited about Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Jordan in May, a big event for a small country like Jordan, especially for the tiny local Catholic Church.

The 80–90,000 native Jordanian Catholics are about evenly divided between Melkites or Byzantine Catholics and what we Westerners know as Roman Catholics. There are also about 35,000 expatriate Catholics, including Filipino and Sri Lankan workers, Iraqi refugees, and small numbers from many other countries. There are also around 90,000 Ortho-

dox Christians in Jordan, as well as a small number of Protestants.

My parish, Sacred Heart, is a special parish for English-speaking expatriates and visitors in Amman, the capital, with a weekend attendance of 800–1,000 people, predominantly Filipino. Many of the Filipinos and other Asians in Jordan work as domestic help for families who do not let them out often, if at all. Many are able to get to Mass only once or twice a month, some just at Christmas and Easter. I don't know how many people consider themselves members of my parish, but I estimate it is around or even well over 15–20,000!

In May, Pope Benedict XVI visited Amman, Jordan, where he said Mass at a soccer stadium, witnessed by author Fr. Kevin O'Connell, SJ.

The schedule

A lot of effort was put into organizing the schedule for the pope's visit. One high point was a meeting of the pope and his entourage with Muslim religious leaders and heads of local universities at a mosque built by the present King Abdullah in memory of his late father, King Hussein.

King Abdullah had warmly welcomed the pope on his arrival at the airport and was there also at the pope's departure to thank him for the visit and to bid him farewell. That was a unique honor to the pope by the king, and it was clear that the two leaders had an easy rapport. I hope that this aspect of the pope's visit will lead to further mutual understanding and respect between Christians and Muslims here in Jordan.

During his stay, Benedict visited the traditional site of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River and the sanctuary



Author Fr. Kevin O'Connell, SJ, and Fr. Jean-Claude Maingot, a Trappist, celebrate Mass at St. Mary of Nazareth, one of four parishes in Amman where O'Connell says weekend Masses in English.

O'Connell, one of four U.S. Jesuits at the Jesuit Center in Amman, was president of Le Moyne College in Syracuse and taught at John Carroll University and Boston College School of Theology and Ministry.

A family matter

I asked a Filipino family to present a gift to the pope. I had celebrated their marriage about eleven years ago and baptized their son and daughter. Both kids had made First Communion in the past few years and are altar servers. Parishioners contributed a small statuette of the Santo Niño from Cebu City and a simple blue stole made in Baguio for the presentation. It was a great pleasure to see members of our parish so visible in the Mass.

I was privileged to distribute Communion to people in one area of the stadium floor and others seated in the stands, and I was struck by the way people waited quietly until Communion was brought to their vicinity.

Several times, people called my attention to aged or infirm persons who couldn't make their way down to where I was standing and helped me climb up to reach them.

The pope's visit was a gift and a grace for the local Catholic and Christian community, a time to celebrate and be encouraged in our faith as a small minority in a Muslim country.

It was also time for Muslims and Christians to welcome a distinguished religious visitor with the warm hospitality for which Jordan is famous. The pope emphasized that he came as a pilgrim and as a pastor. I hope his visit brought him consolation and affirmation. **G**

For more information:

Jesuit Center in Amman:

www.jesuitcenterjo.org

Sacred Heart Parish in Amman

www.wfu.edu/~horton/amman



Workers from the Philippines make up a large percentage of the English-speaking people to whom O'Connell ministers in Amman. "Many of the Filipinos and other Asians here in Jordan work as domestic helpers for families who do not let them out often, if at all," he says.

at Mount Nebo, from which Moses is said to have had his only glimpse of the Promised Land, and he also blessed several projects of the local Church.

Mass at the stadium

Another high point of the visit was the Mass the pope celebrated at the

soccer stadium in Amman for perhaps 20–30,000 people. In spite of the size of the crowd and the heat of the sun, it was a prayerful time. The mood of the crowd was celebratory, and the people sang and sometimes cheered with enthusiasm. At the same time, there was a tone of real reverence during the prayers of the Mass.

I was in the crowd within perhaps ten feet of the pope as he entered the stadium, and I was even closer to him as he left. I had the impression that our eyes met for a fleeting second, but I'm sure he had no impression of me!

Tickets for the Mass were free but required. In the days leading up to it, I distributed more than 2,700 tickets to my parishioners. It was a delight to see them mingling with the local Christians and with many who had come from Lebanon and Syria for the event.

There were eight offertory petitions at the Mass, by eight people representing different segments of the local Catholic population. I was asked to select two parishioners, one to read a petition in English and the other for a petition in Tagalog, the Filipino national language. I asked an Indian ophthalmologist married to a Jordanian doctor to present the petition in English; she has lived in Amman for many years and is an active member of our Sunday evening liturgy. For the petition in Tagalog, I selected a fourteen-year-old Filipino, born in Amman to parents who have worked here for many years. He has grown up in our parish, was confirmed last year, and serves Mass regularly.