

My Experiences: Ellenna Wilkinson

As Head Girl of Blessed Trinity I had the opportunity to attend the Big Assembly with Pope Benedict XVI at Twickenham on the 17th September 2010. It was an early start (1.30am) when I, the Head Boy, Deputy Head Girl and Deputy Head Boy of Blessed Trinity met 48 other young people and teachers in Rawtenstall to commence our journey. I had memories of the Pope from when I saw him in Valencia with Father Simon, other parishioners and my family but on this occasion it was different as I had been chosen to represent the youth of today, both the Catholic and non-catholic young people of the UK.

We arrived in Twickenham, at St. Mary's College at 6am where we had 'front row seats' in the playing fields. The atmosphere even at that time was electrifying! I was surrounded by a sea of 3,500 young people, different colours of school uniforms spread around the assembly area, young people in wheelchairs, teachers and The Media. I have been to many football matches and concerts but this was a different kind of excitement, people were exchanging stories of what they had learnt about the visit so far, what they had seen on the television, and their experiences of the security checks and who they had seen or not seen. Large Banners could be seen across the crowds and everyone had the traditional papal yellow and white flags, waving them tirelessly and frantically.

At around 10.30 am a big cheer came from the assembly crowd and Pope Benedict appeared on the large screen. The assembly crowd went quiet and nobody uttered a sound as you watched and listened to The Father of Our Church leading prayers at St Marys Chapel. There was an aura of respect, love and community as we all listened to the Holy Father : his voice quiet, our eyes not moving from the large screen. At the end of the service Pope Benedict received a framed mosaic of the Madonna del Popolo.

Then the screen went off and Andy Akinwolere, (a former Blue Peter Presenter,) announced to us that The Holy Father was now on his way. The crowd went wild cheering, clapping and chanting erupted across the field. The sun even came out in anticipation. The tension was unbearable, you couldn't help but join in : "Viva la Papa " and "Benedicto". I felt really emotional and when I saw The Pope Mobile I couldn't put into words how I felt. It hit me that I was actually in the presence of The Holy Father.

People were clamouring to touch his hand and as he drove past he looked into the crowd and it felt wonderful ! We all Began to sing an African hymn "Siyahamba – We are walking in the light of god." When he drove past it was breath taking, he looked quite small and humble but his smile was beautiful and somehow I felt safe and warm in his presence.

Bishop McMahon welcomed Pope Benedict xiv, he said ***"At the heart of Catholic Education is our understanding that young people shall have life and have it to the full."*** The Pope told the congregation, that he gave ***"thanks and praise"*** for the work of the teaching orders who had carried the ***"light of the Gospel"*** to far-off lands. ***"It is about forming the human person, equipping him or her to live life to the full - in short, it is about imparting wisdom,"*** . I think the biggest inspiration for me was when he said to us ***"I hope that among those of you listening to me today there are some of the future saints of the 21st century. "What God wants most of all for each one of you is that you should become holy."*** He added: ***"When I invite you to become saints, I am asking you not to be content with second best."*** This made me think of what I really valued in my life, and if I was equipped to live life to the full ? as it shouldn't be material things like new clothes, the latest mobile or computer but things that don't cost money : family, friends and most importantly my faith.

The theme of the assembly was : Community, Friendship and Faith. This was supported in different aspects of the assembly. For Community; we had

children from England, Scotland and Wales, each presenting Pope Benedict with a bible in English, Gaelic and Welsh. For friendship we had a primary school who told us about their partnership with a school in Gambia, Africa. In this part of the assembly a Satellite hook up enabled us to see the children in the Gambian school. They spoke to the Father and he accepted gifts from them which they had made. The children of the school told us that all children around the world should pray together

For the faith part of the assembly we had governors, students, and teachers from around the country reading bidding prayers to which we replied, "To Live Life to the Full." The Holy Father then asked us all to join together in Prayer to recite Our Lord's Prayer. We ended the Service with singing "Fill your Hearts with joy and gladness." And "Tell Out My Soul." The Pope closed the ceremony by saying : "I promise to pray for you, and I ask you to pray for me.". Again the crowd went into uproar and song as he left the playing fields. On the way out of the assembly I was asked to be interviewed by Radio 4. Normally I would have been nervous and apprehensive at the thought of this but I was 'buzzing ' with everything I had seen and I just wanted to tell anyone that would listen ! even if that was thousands of listeners on a radio show !

We set off back to Rawtenstal at approximately 1.30pm. I think it took me the whole journey back just to digest everything I had seen and witnessed. I Ellenna Wilkinson had seen Pope Benedict XVI, it was a once in a lifetime experience that will stay with me forever. All too often the young people of today are given a negative image , and sometimes this is deserved however after the assembly I felt proud to be not only a catholic, but also a young person of the UK and I was both moved, excited and yet somehow humbled to have been in the presence of such a holy man.

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