



Bush Hails Pope at Opening of John Paul II Cultural Center

by Brian McGuire

March 28, 2001 / WASHINGTON - President George W. Bush visited Catholic University of America in northeast Washington March 22 with a salute to John Paul II and a plea to "defend and love the innocent child waiting to be born."

Bush's pro-life remarks, part of a speech at the dedication of the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, across the street from the college campus, produced a long standing ovation from the crowd.



"On his four pilgrimages to America, he has spoken with wisdom and feeling about our strengths and our flaws, our successes and our needs," Bush told the crowd of Catholic leaders. "And he is never more eloquent than when he speaks for a culture of life." Such a culture, Bush said, makes room for the stranger, comforts the sick, cares for the aged, welcomes immigrants, teaches children to be gentle and loves the unborn.

Critics noted that he made no reference to one of the Holy Father's most prominent lectures to Americans: opposition to the death penalty, which Bush supports.

On March 22, Bush, a Methodist, spoke of the Pope's humanitarian efforts and travels to 123 countries, as well as his visit to a synagogue and an Islamic country. "His is not the power of armies or technology or wealth," the president said. "It is the unexpected power of a baby in a stable, of a man on a cross, of a simple fisherman who carried a message of hope to Rome."

After cutting a ribbon with Cardinal Adam J. Maida, archbishop of Detroit, Mich., and head of the foundation that built the museum, Bush took a brief tour of the \$65 million facility, which houses Vatican art, interactive exhibits and a center for scholars.

The night before the dedication, Bush hosted a delegation of U.S. Catholic cardinals, bishops and lay leaders at the White House as part of the festivities surrounding the cultural center.

Bush told his guests: "I've been struck by a lot of things as I've had the opportunity to meet the leadership of the Catholic Church. I think the thing that has captured my heart the most is the not only universal care for the weak and the suffering, but also the strong focus on making sure every child is educated.

"All of you are part of the humanizing mission which is part of the 'great commission' and the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, which we will dedicate tomorrow, will bring this message to generations of Americans in this capital of our nation.

"The best way to honor Pope John Paul II, truly one of the great men, is to take his teaching seriously; is to listen to his words and put his words and teachings into action here in America. This is a challenge we must accept."

George Weigel, whose papal biography *Witness to Hope* was the source of several of the president's

observations, said he was impressed with the speech.

"I think it suggests the enormous strength of the papacy as a witness to fundamental moral truths and that this is what the world and the Church expect of popes now," he said.

"The world and the Church do not expect the Pope to be an institutional manager," he added, "they expect him to be a witness."

The Catholic-friendly tone of the president's remarks was the subject of much comment the next day.

On the Web site National Review Online, John J. Miller and Ramesh Ponnuru wrote, "President Bush seems to be doing everything possible to emulate John F. Kennedy - he's not just cutting taxes, he's becoming America's second Catholic president." They said that in his remarks he "began to sound like the pontiff himself."

Bush advisor and Crisis magazine editor Deal Hudson, however, said that Bush isn't trying to become the next Catholic President:

"The strategy is to reach out to Catholics whose faith makes a difference to them in the way they think politically and the way they vote," said Hudson. "The president and his advisors understand the difference."

Said Hudson, the main reaction among Catholic leaders present at the speech was "Wow, isn't this a refreshing change? Isn't it wonderful that we have a President that appreciates Catholics, what they really are, instead of ignoring most central moral beliefs Catholics hold?"

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