

Brentwood plays its part in Papal Visit



Brentwood Diocese was heavily involved in the recent Papal Visit of Pope Benedict XVI, with almost all schools sending deputations to The Big Assembly at Twickenham and parish groups attending both the Vigil of Prayer and the Birmingham beatification; Kieran Hayes from Billericay parish was chosen to read bidding prayers at the Westminster Abbey Evening Prayer while Edwin Fawcett's youth gospel choir performed at Hyde Park.

Most high profile among the individual contributors, perhaps, was Paschal Uche who welcomed Pope Benedict on the steps of Westminster Cathedral on behalf of the UK's Catholic youth. But many others made significant behind the scenes contributions to the event, not least Fr Andrew Headon who co-ordinated the whole Vigil but also Fr Dominic Howarth, chair of the national body for Catholic youth ministry, CYMFed. He said: "CYMFed set up a small committee from around the country to co-ordinate the involvement of as many young people as possible in the visit." Thus a young representative from almost every parish in the UK heard Uche's welcome outside Westminster Cathedral and went on to the Hyde Park vigil. Fr Dominic, who is past

director of BCYS, read a prayer at the event and Vicar General Mgr John Armitage also spoke. Five seminarians posed for photos with Pope Benedict at Oscott on Sunday afternoon.

For Uche, a member of Stratford parish, it was a day to remember. His enthusiasm and sincerity impressed everyone as he welcomed the Pope, with his words punctuated by cheers from the young people in the crowd. He likened the visit to a family reunion and said: "Gathered here are 2,500 young people representing almost every parish in the country...we are a truly living church that offers great opportunities for young people to encounter and share the love of Christ." After asking Pope Benedict to bless a candlestand as a symbol of Catholic youth ministry, he continued: "For many of us, before today you were a face on TV or a picture in a church but today we behold you face to face and on behalf of the Catholic youth of this great nation, I would like to express my profound and heartfelt gratitude for your visit."

Pope Benedict seemed visibly moved by the young man's words, as by the warmth of the welcome given him by the young people gathered on the Cathedral piazza. "I didn't expect to shake his hand," recalls Paschal. "I was a little lost for words but he congratulated me and said he would pray for me."

The 21-year-old pharmacy student had written the words of his welcome to the Pope himself. "Fr Dominic gave me a lot of freedom to put in what I wanted to put in. I fed off what I felt everyone else would have said," he commented. "My heart starting pumping when the Pope came out but I had lots of Brentwood support and I felt they were with

me.”



For Fr Dominic, it was a particular highlight. “As Paschal spoke he became aware that the Pope was listening intently to each word and in a sense it became a personal message.”

While the Pope returned to Westminster Cathedral to greet the people of Wales, Paschal was plunged into a crush of media attention, with interviews with the BBC and the News of the World to name but two. “I didn’t feel nervous because the main thing was done. There wasn’t much time to reflect as we had to head for Hyde Park.”

During the afternoon, 3,000 young people in brightly coloured diocesan t-shirts enjoyed act after act with the rest of the vast audience and shared a lot of fun. The hour before the Pope’s arrival saw performances from the Newham Catholic Gospel Choir, led by Edwin Fawcett. “The 28 young choir members are mostly from St Antony’s at Forest Gate, St Bonaventure and St Angela’s schools,” says Fawcett, a youth worker and freelance musician, who also runs St Patrick’s Gospel Choir at Soho Square. “We sang two songs during the procession of diocesan banners.” The first was Taste and see, written by Fawcett himself and based on Psalm 34; and the second was Let it rise by American writer Holland Davis.

Fawcett was exhilarated by the whole experience. “There was a great atmosphere of

celebration and festival and everyone was really excited. It felt a real privilege to be able to be there.”

Fr Dominic agreed. “It was a tremendous afternoon of exhilarating excitement in the build-up, juxtaposed with moments of profound stillness and reflection. That really struck people there and at home.” It gave him much personal satisfaction that the producer co-ordinating camera angles followed the request from himself and Fr Andrew to keep the camera on the monstrance for long moments, with silence in the commentary. “He really took that on and it was very good to ensure that happened.”

Fr Andrew Headon, who is soon to join St Peter and Paul's parish in Ilford, concurs: “There was a moment during rehearsals when we - Mgr Armitage, Edwin, Fr Dominic and I – realised what a brilliant occasion we were producing and shared some diocesan pride in working together.”

Uche simply says: “I am so grateful to have been part of it all. It was a wonderful occasion for the Church. One of the heartwarming things I noticed was that people said they didn't realise there were this many young people in the church.” And he has received a plethora of emails and messages from people wanting to comment and be his friend on Facebook since the transmission of his welcome speech. “I knew my friends would comment but I didn't expect to receive messages from around the country and the world, saying how much it had impacted on them and inspired them. One guy in Kenya was watching with his baby in his arms and found himself crying and I have had lots of messages of goodwill from Catholics and other Christians too. I suppose it was quite an ecumenical message – about standing up for faith and getting it back on the agenda. I hope that is what the Pope's visit has done.”