Pope draws 125,000 to Park; rally held in protest

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Under misty skies, Pope John Paul II culminated his four-day visit to the tri-State area Saturday morning with a papal Mass on the Great Lawn of Central Park, which was attended by about 125,000 people, including a group of approximately 50 Columbia students.

Security was tight, especially in the sections closest to the altar, where policemen checked bags next to a line of metal detectors.

The stage at the south end of the Great Lawn was flanked by two giant TV screens, with a flag of the Vatican seal hanging directly behind the altar.

Preceding the Mass, the focal point of the Pope's visit to New York City, the "Sunrise Concert" began with a Hail Mary and in
included performances by the New York Archdiocesan Children’s Choir, the U.S. Coast Guard Choir, the West Point Cadet Choir, the Boys’ Choir of Harlem, Roberta Flack, Jon Secada, and Natalie Cole.

When he finally arrived in his Pope-mobile, the crowd applauded and cheered.

“Pope John Two, we love you!” they chanted, as the Pope waved and smiled in return.

The Pope greeted the people and joked about the miserable weather.

“This is New York! The great, great New York! This is Central Park. The beautiful surroundings of Central Park invite us to reflect on a more sublime beauty.”

Remembering the World Youth Day in Denver in 1994, the Pope’s homily focused on the youth as the future of the Catholic Church.

“The young people’s joy, their hunger for truth, their desire to be united all together in the body of Christ, made clear to everyone that many, very many young people of America have values and ideals which seldom make the headlines,” the Pope said.

He also called on the onlookers to help within their communities.

“Just as Mary visited Elizabeth, you are called to ‘visit’ the needs of the poor, the hungry, the homeless, those who are alone or ill; for example, those suffering from AIDS. You are called to stand up for life. You are called to respect and defend the mystery of life always and everywhere, including the lives of unborn babies, giving real help and encouragement to mothers in difficult situations,” he said.

John Cardinali, CC ’96, defended many of the Pope’s political positions, which have encountered resistance in the U.S.
“I support the Pope’s views on those controversial issues. I’m sure there are varying opinions, not all Catholics agree. But that’s the way I was brought up,” Cardinale said.

“There’s no reason you can’t love and support him if you disagree,” Cardinale said.

“People tend to think of the Catholic Church as one big monolith with the Pope leading. But it’s really one-fifth of the world’s population with 2000 years of history behind it,” Chris Milenkevich, CC ’96, said. Denise Savini, CC ’98, said she was impressed by the Pope’s coverage of a wide range of issues in his speech.

“He talked about everything, he touched on all the beliefs of the Catholic faith,” Savini said.

“His homily, in effect, declared his advocacy for youth,” Cardinale said.

On Saturday afternoon, the Pope prayed a Rosary in St. Patrick’s Cathedral.

Yesterday, he traveled to Baltimore, before returning to Rome last night.

Chanting “Two, four, six, eight, you can’t make us procreate” and “Abortion is a right, health care is a right” approximately 50 Columbia and Barnard students joined thousands of protesters Saturday in a demonstration against what they consider anti-feminist and anti-gay rhetoric advocated by Pope John Paul II and the Catholic Church.

The march, which began at Bryant Park and ended at Columbus Circle, lasted more than three hours, and was planned to coincide with the Pope’s Mass in Central Park, which attracted more than 125,000 people.

Alyssa Mt. Pleasant, BC ’97 and a member of Columbia-Barnard Students for Choice, said the group participated in the event to express support for women’s rights, reproductive freedom, and economic and social
justice for everyone."

"Basically, we're going down today to be a voice; just to let people know that the Pope is not the only person out there with a point of view," Mt. Pleasant said. "We believe very strongly in women's rights to determine their futures, their reproductive choice, and other choices that enable them to do what they want, not necessarily dictated by the beliefs of one religious group."

Louis Hyman, SEAS '99, said it was important to balance the Pope's conservative beliefs with pro-choice and gay-rights beliefs.

"[I am going on the march] to protest the politics of anti-choice, anti-gay rhetoric by the Catholic Church and the right wing in general in this country," Hyman said. "I think it's an offense to America's values of freedom.
and equality. I think that’s the basis for our country, and I think that’s what has to be brought back to us.”

“This is not against the Pope as a religious figure, but rather against the Pope as a political figure,” Hyman added.

Kelley Kreitz, GC ’99, also viewed the march as a protest against the Pope’s positions, not as a personal attack against him.

“I’m not so much protesting the Pope being here, but I just wanted to make sure that at the same time people understand that some of the things the Pope represents are not right for women, like his stand on birth control, his stand on abortion,” Kreitz said.

New York State Assemblyman Scott Stringer, who joined the protesters, said that while the Pope’s visit was exhilarating for some, others viewed his beliefs as offensive.

“The Pope is on a mission of peace and for many it’s a true religious experience, but there are issues that the Pope must hear about, like what women can do with their bodies,” Stringer said.

Some onlookers, however who were interviewed, said they were offended by the protesters.

“After going to see the Pope today and hearing that he wants us to defend human life, especially that of the unborn, I think [the protest] is degrading,” Mary Crepanier said.

Jim Senyszyn, a member of ACT-UP, an
AIDS research and education organization, dressed up like the Pope, and said he was protesting against the existence of the papacy and its beliefs.

"I am protesting the adulation the Pope is receiving. I think it's a leftover of the old monarchical form of government, with emperors, kings, and queens, and isn't consistent with our democratic traditions, where people decide things for themselves and think things over for themselves," said Senyszyn, who donned a sign with "God" and "emperor" crossed out and the words "vestige of Roman Empire worship" over his mock white papal robes.

Senyszyn described the Catholic Church signs posted throughout New York subways as contrary to ACT-UP's promotion of responsible sex and its encouragement of condom-use for the sexually active.

John Riley, also of ACT-UP, agreed that the Church's approach has failed to curtail the spread of AIDS, noting that by the year 2020 the number of AIDS victims could reach 140 million.

"What we're here to do today is to demand that the Church start teaching about safer sex," Riley said, adding that the "Church's homophobia" is dangerous.

"The Church's homophobia is killing our teens. Many young gay and bisexual men are getting infected because they're not dealing with their sexuality," Riley added.
Protesters rallied against Pope John Paul II on Saturday in a demonstration against what they consider "anti-feminist and anti-gay rhetoric."