

# An Encounter of Love

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When I was first asked to be part of the offertory procession during the closing Mass of World Youth Day in Sydney, I was somewhat seized with excitement. A few days later, after the reality of this privilege was more fully absorbed, I resorted to my usual course of action – to plan ahead. For me, planning ahead is an ordinary thing. I rarely leave affairs at the mercy of spontaneity and devising multiple plans for multiple scenarios has earned me the reputation as the 'King of what-if'. This time things were different though. I knew that this would be an important moment in my life, one for which I wanted to be completely prepared. Funnily enough though, in the build up to WYD, this train of thought eventually steered me off the track of reason. Rather than being calm and collected in my approach, I adopted a very pedantic methodology of planning, spurred by the thought of standing face to face with the Holy Father in front of over 500,000 people!

Thankfully, I avoided driving myself mad with planning when I attended the liturgical rehearsals a week before WYD and realised I wasn't alone in my enthusiasm. Although the offertory procession was at most a 15 minute part, I had to attend two rehearsals that went for about 4 hours each. Most of my time at the rehearsals was spent waiting around in an empty racecourse in freezing weather and hungry enough to eat a horse (pun intended), but the excitement had numbed my senses and I was unable to react with any logical emotions one might ordinarily feel in such scenarios. Only one thing was consistent; a little voice in my head repeatedly echoing "you're going to meet the Pope!"

When the big day finally arrived, I was running on a massive dose of adrenalin and my mind was frantically going through last minute checks. One would think that a simple procession to the altar would not warrant such terrifying thoughts. But by then all reason had long been lost. I had enough electricity flowing through my body to light up a city, and by then nothing else seemed to matter. Of course, the day didn't begin without its hurdles. At one point, my wheelchair decided that it wouldn't keep up with me and refused to turn back on. I sat in the dressing room stranded for about five minutes praying that it would turn back on! Eventually, a flicker of light was seen and it all went back to normal - only a few seconds before I was about to have a fully fledged heart attack.

Finally, I managed to make it to my seating area for the final Mass. As the Holy Father entered Randwick racecourse, the atmosphere seemed to dazzle; it was something special, something I have never felt before. Then it happened. While deeply immersed in a deluge of exhilaration and before I even knew what was happening, I was told to make my way up to the high altar. It is beyond the power of words to explain what I was feeling on my way up, but I can remember that my mind was continuously regurgitating what I had planned to say to the Holy Father - yep, I was as ready as ever to meet the Pope!

Finally, after skipping one too many heartbeats, I was standing face to face with the Vicar of Christ. What happened at that point I am yet to understand as the futility of my efforts to plan for the moment became apparent. I stood before the Pope and immediately froze, losing the ability to speak. Everything I had planned to say evaporated as I stood in awe before the Pope. With love and absolute gentleness, the Holy Father then put out his right hand, placed it on my left cheek and blessed me. It took every ounce of strength I could muster just to hold back my tears as an overflowing surge of joy stirred deep within me. That was it; I can say with all surety that it was the pinnacle point of my life.

When I tell people what happened to me as I stood before the Pope, they're often mystified by my involuntary reaction and begin comparing my encounter with that of the countless politicians who meet him daily, who are apparently able to converse face to face with the pope quite seamlessly. My response to this is simple; my encounter wasn't political nor was it a mere formality. Unlike most politicians, I knew without a doubt that the man in whose presence I stood was the representative of Christ on earth, the man to whom God Himself has entrusted His beloved Church. No, this encounter was not a shallow gesture burdened with the formality of protocol – it was a profound encounter, overwhelmed by genuine peace and entrenched in a very real love.

