

Returning to the scene

Marian Pilgrimage marks anniversary of JPII shooting

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VATICAN CITY - The Vatican observed the 25th anniversary of the shooting of Pope John Paul II with a Marian pilgrimage and the laying of a marble marker at the place he was shot.

In a message to participants, Pope Benedict XVI said the memorial stone in St. Peter's Square would remind visitors of that "dramatic event" that left his predecessor near death.

The white stone was laid into the pavement where Pope John Paul was riding in his open jeep May 13, 1981, when Turkish assailant Mehmet Ali Agca shot him in the hand and lower abdomen. The memorial recalled the date of the shooting in Roman numerals.

A similar marker was placed inside the Vatican at the entrance to the Vatican's health center, where the pope received initial medical care before being rushed to a Rome hospital.

The Vatican commemoration featured the release of hundreds of blue and yellow balloons - the colors of the late pope's crest - and ended with a fireworks display above St. Peter's Square.

More than 10,000 pilgrims came to the square to pray in the late afternoon, the time of the papal shooting 25 years earlier, and laid flowers around the stone marker.

Celebrating Mass in the basilica, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, papal vicar of Rome, asked for prayers for the late pope's beatification. His words were met by long applause.

A statue of Our Lady of Fatima was flown in from the Fatima sanctuary in Portugal for the occasion and brought by helicopter to the pilgrimage assembly site. Pilgrims then carried it in procession to the square.

The shooting took place on the feast of Our Lady of Fatima, and Pope John Paul always credited Mary with saving his life.

Pope Benedict recalled the late pope's special devotion to Mary in a midday talk May 14. Addressing thousands of people from his apartment window above St. Peter's Square, he said Pope John Paul had always felt that Mary's "maternal hand" had miraculously saved him from death.

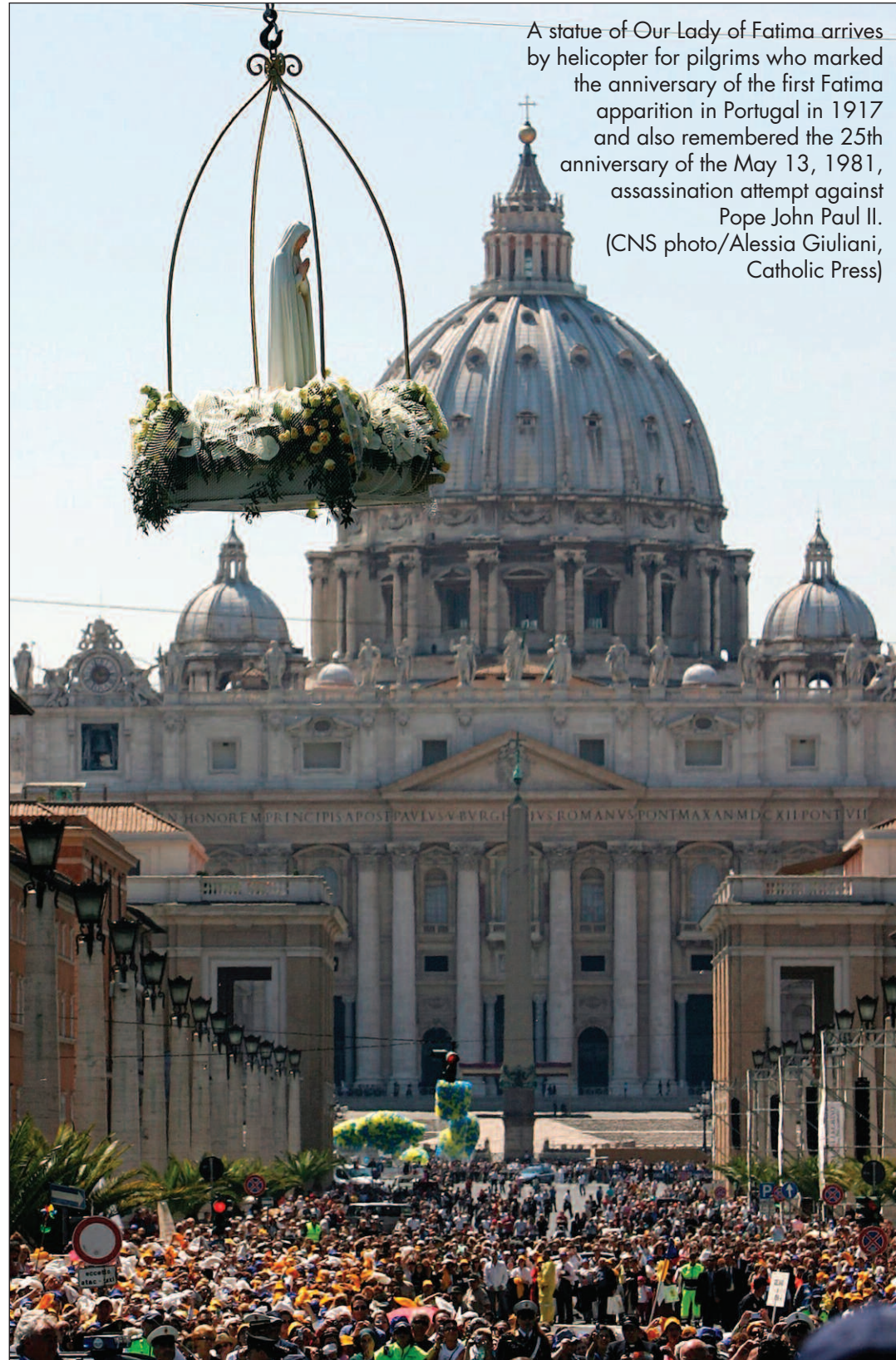
The late pope's entire pontificate was marked by the Marian apparitions to three children in Fatima, Portugal, in 1917, and by what Mary foretold in her messages to the young visionaries, Pope Benedict said.

"The message she gave them, in continuity with the message of Lourdes, was a strong call to prayer and conversion," the pope said.

"That is a truly prophetic message, considering that the 20th century was afflicted by unprecedented destruction caused by wars and totalitarian regimes, as well as by extensive persecution against the Church," he said.

The pope prayed that Mary would continue to watch over the Church and all humanity, especially families, mothers and children.

Back in Portugal, hundreds of thousands of people also commemorated the anniversaries.



A statue of Our Lady of Fatima arrives by helicopter for pilgrims who marked the anniversary of the first Fatima apparition in Portugal in 1917 and also remembered the 25th anniversary of the May 13, 1981, assassination attempt against Pope John Paul II. (CNS photo/Alessia Giuliani, Catholic Press)



A marble plaque, placed in St. Peter's Square May 13, marks the spot of the assassination attempt against Pope John Paul II May 13, 1981. The shooting took place on the feast of Our Lady of Fatima, and the late pope always credited Mary with saving his life. (CNS photo/Max Rossi, Reuters)



The statue is carried in procession from Castel Sant'Angelo to St. Peter's Square at the Vatican May 13. (CNS photo)



A pilgrim holds a booklet bearing an image of Pope John Paul II during a candlelight vigil at the Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal May 12. More than 400,000 pilgrims converged on Fatima to celebrate the May 13 anniversary of the first apparition of the Virgin Mary to three shepherd children in 1917. (CNS photo/Nacho Doce)



A pilgrim prays on her knees at the shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal May 12. (CNS Photo Nacho Doce, Reuters)



Pope John Paul II meets with Carmelite Sister Lucia dos Santos May 13, 1982. One year earlier, the pope survived an attempted assassination at the Vatican. The pope, in thanksgiving that his life was spared, had one of the bullets that struck him embedded in the crown of the statue of Our Lady at Fatima. (CNS photo courtesy of Shrine of Fatima)



More than 400,000 pilgrims gather at the Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in central Portugal May 12, on the eve of the anniversary of the first apparition at Fatima in 1917. (CNS photo/Nacho Doce)