

RELIGION

The Pope will revive the warmth of a shared cuppa

By TONY ABBOTT

EXIT the knockers who have dominated media previews of the papal tour and enter John Paul II superstar. That is the official Catholic scenario and this week the Church is likely to be right. Incredibly, Australia's public life will be dominated for a week by a man dedicated to celibacy, prayer and asceticism, and by a faith which commands the assent of scarcely 25 percent of Australia's people. How does he do it?

It is not the Pope's rhetoric. As *The Bulletin* goes to press the content of the Pope's addresses is still unknown. Speculation is that the Pope will tell young people at the Sydney Cricket Ground that they are the hope of the future; workers in Sydney's outer west that labor has rights and dignity; Aborigines in Alice Springs that the Church supports struggle for justice; the religious in Melbourne that they must be true to their commitment; the media in Brisbane that their work must reflect enduring values; the Polish community in Melbourne that Catholicism and their culture are indivisible, and students at Sydney University that ultimate truth is found only in God. According to Father Jim McLaren, New South Wales spokesman of the papal tour office, the Pope's overriding message will stress the value of regular attendance at Mass and the practice of personal prayer. When local churchmen say much the same thing there are yawns all round; when the Pope says it the nation will stop and listen. Why?

John Paul II has the capacity to make hard-bitten observers gush. A Melbourne journalist told *The Bulletin* that the Pope is "... the most generous ... the most welcoming spirit I've ever encountered". In support he cited the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, who described the Pope as "... warm, a man of love. He goes out to meet you and doesn't wait for you to go out to him ... When he smiles the sun comes out ...". Yet the dramatic impact of the Pope's personality, attested by all who meet him, hardly explains the fervor he inspires.

Despite the confusion which abounds in the Catholic Church, the office of the papacy with its ancient lineage and varied renown still finds deep

echoes within the human heart. The Pope has come to stand for the peace, goodwill and understanding that mankind yearns for and struggles for in vain. What sounds trite or self-serving from worldly potentates can be inspiring when uttered by the Pope because people sense that his life actually reflects a sincere striving for those values.

As were his recent predecessors, John Paul is too big a man for religious faction. According to Father Paul Collins, in his recent book *Mixed Blessings*, the Pope's vision for the Church is "more subtle, personal and idiosyn-



cratic" than a simple restoration of traditional Catholicism. His insistence on traditional teaching and structure continues to dismay "progressives" but his engagement with the world and his dynamic and even heroic personal style compel their respect. What is undeniable is that he has raised interest in the papacy to a new height and restored a measure of confidence and vitality, if not yet cohesion, to the Catholic Church. Not all Catholics know or like the directions in which he is prodding the Church but they sense strong leadership and are excited by the certainty and conviction he projects.

A senior churchman told *The Bulletin* that the "negative" slant to most media analysis of the Church's problems "will dent the enthusiasm of the people". But Patrick Boyce, media officer for the national papal tour office, said that the close and sometimes critical focus on the Church was "part of

what we really wanted to happen ... to make the Church as a host of individuals think again and look at where they are ... instead of the usual quiet ignorance".

Initial popular concern over the tour's cost and sponsorship seems to have evaporated. According to Father Brian Lucas, the Church's official spokesman in Sydney, "there's not a bus to be found anywhere". A tour organizer in outer Sydney says that the prospect of a four-hour wait at Randwick prior to the papal Mass has been a minimal deterrent. "We've got people from Bowral using our buses because theirs are already full." Fifty special buses are reported to be taking Sydneysiders to Melbourne for the Pope's address to the Polish community.

Inevitably, there will be controversy. The tour office has submitted to the Pope a number of "very frank" media questions on women priests, clerical celibacy and sexual ethics. The Pope's predictable reiteration of standard Church teaching will escape the usual censure because the papal alchemy focuses attention on the fundamentals which unite and not on the accidentals which divide. In addition, women opposed to the Church's "evil patriarchy" plan a protest in Sydney's Hyde Park. But this will have as much impact on the millions of participants in the papal tour as Women Against Rape in War have on Anzac Day marchers.

Here at last, Christians seem to be saying, is someone for whom we can all rejoice and with whom we can all identify in some way. There is a sense of approaching comfort and warmth, of paternal guidance and of wonder recaptured. A participant in the Randwick papal Mass of Paul VI in 1970 described it this way: "An appeal had been made to 'make your neighbor welcome'. Next to us a lady passed a thermos of hot tea to a stranger. He unfortunately broke the flask but the lady owner graciously refused to accept any payment. They compromised on a joint lottery ticket".

Sixteen years later the mood seems much the same. Then, an Australian Catholic Truth Society pamphlet commented: "Thus was written another golden page in the history of the Catholic Church in Australia". John Paul II will be trying to recreate that sublime assurance. □