

Pope Paul

It was late summer in Rome and a beautiful morning. The crowd of Prix Italia delegates stood, fidgeting on the pavement, waiting for a coach to arrive. We were used to excursions, visiting places of interest in the various cities where the festival took place. This was to be another. I remember someone asking 'where are we going?' Another in the crowd, jokingly replied 'We'll be going to see the Pope!'

Bruce Christensen, the Prix Italia's American President, who ran PBS, the American Public Broadcasting Service, from its headquarters in Washington, was Mormon and wore the smart, blue blazer, favoured by members of his Church. I had put on a dark suit but others were casually dressed, a senior British delegate wearing a tennis shirt under his jacket, acceptable off-duty attire in 1993.

The coach began snaking its way through the traffic and soon the rumour gained credence. We were heading for Castel Gandolfo, the Pope's summer residence, in the cool hills outside Rome. For the international delegates, the traditional image of the Pope was that of a tiny figure, in white, seen on television, on a balcony, before huge crowds in St Peter's Square. We had seen him deliver his annual address, Urbi et Orbi, in this way. We would doubtless see him appear on a balcony at the castle before what we presumed would be a more intimate gathering, a few hundred maybe.

And so it seemed, when the coach halted and we stepped out. I actually recognised a figure in the crowd, the Provost of a small town on the Scottish border, near my home. Intimate indeed. Then the distinguished figure of Piergiorgio Branzi, the Secretary General, grey hair swept back, gestured us through the crowd to an entrance to the castle. What was this? Where were we going?



Pope John Paul II addresses a Prix Italia audience

The delegates entered an ante-room holding about 40 people. The talking stopped and we all looked at the platform at the end of the room, with a doorway behind. Presently, the door opened; and the atmosphere changed. Pope Paul stepped through the doorway,

wearing his papal gown, accompanied by a slim figure to his right, as I recall, carrying a folder.

Pope Paul took his seat and began a welcome which touched on the work of the Prix Italia. Those opening moments were the most impressive I had ever witnessed. Every person in that room was focussed on the figure in white. The speech had been prepared and was read from the folder. I believe the aide who handed the folder to Pope Paul was Cardinal Ratzinger. We did not know then what the future was to unfold.

Pope Paul had about him the air of a man who graced the top echelons of the world. I am sure he must have been an inspiration to those in his native Poland who so longed to change the regime that had been in place since the end of the war, in 1945. He exuded an undeniable presence.



Pope Paul John II meets Prix Italia Honorary President Jim Graham

It was during his address that Pope Paul used the statement that I immediately committed to memory and have quoted on countless occasions: 'You have within your hands a great instrument of communication. Use it for the benefit of Mankind'.

That has been my guiding light over many years. What was the programme trying to say? What was its message? Any documentary that I commissioned or worked on was dedicated to that theme: how would its message benefit mankind? How would it lead to greater understanding? How would it contribute to the concept of one human family, in all its glories, its heartaches, pains and sorrows in the belief that, if we love one another, we can surmount the harshness of fate?

Every now and again, we encounter a statement that influences the way we think. It happened that day, in Castel Gandolfo.