

S.A. pilgrims were there Alamo City residents were among the faithful seeking a glimpse of Pope John Paul II.

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MEXICO - On a dark slice of street, San Antonio pilgrims huddled Wednesday in the brisk morning air to catch a glimpse of Pope John Paul II zooming by on his way to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe to canonize an Indian icon.

About 2 miles from the basilica, at the juncture of Calzada de Guadalupe and Calzada de los Misterios, the religious travelers, most from San Antonio, parked their ice chests and wrapped themselves in blankets as security officers and vendors of religious items swirled around them.

It was 5 a.m.

A last-minute deal brokered with papal officials to purchase hundred-dollar tickets into the basilica fell through in the wee hours of Wednesday, but the pilgrims put on a brave face and weathered Mexico's dank and dingy streets.

They were rewarded with a close-up view of a bent but buoyant pope as he shuttled by, waving, in the bulletproof Mercedes-Benz "popemobile."

"It was incredible," said Alex Guevara, a Fort Worth resident traveling with his children and his parents on a bus with San Antonio pilgrims. "There's a fluttering of my heart, I think. I feel light-headed."

Still, days of touring and negotiating to get near the pope took their toll after the procession passed. The weary travelers slumped into lawn chairs to watch the canonization of the Indian Juan Diego on big-screen televisions erected in the street.

Hundreds of Mexican worshippers, on their knees and wiping tears from their eyes, gathered around the San Antonio group to witness the religious rite as well.

Lidia Mata of San Antonio said she was disappointed at the last-minute ticket glitch, but was elated even to lay eyes on the pope. The pilgrims hardly had dared to hope they might see him when they left San Antonio without tickets.

"I give thanks to God that I was present here," said Mata, her brown eyes moist. "I would have really liked to be in the basilica, but with the presence of the pope here, God is present in all of us."

As dawn lightened the streets in the hours leading up to the procession, pilgrims bought religious trinkets, such as holographic images of the pope, strings of pinball-size rosary beads and balloons tinted white and gold for the colors of the Vatican flag.

They watched Mexico City dancers bedecked in colorful penachos (headdresses) and iridescent capes perform the danza Azteca in a cloud of incense.

The smell of rotten fruit hovered around a garbage truck parked nearby in anticipation of event cleanup.

Garbage collectors perched on top of the truck hoping for a pope sighting.

Stray dogs trotted up and down past crowds, lapping up any food casually discarded. A giant stone cross, erected during the pope's last visit, loomed over the faithful.

San Antonio pilgrims joined in the ringing chants of Mexican worshippers: "Juan Pablo, llamamos. Por eso, madrugamos," (John Paul, we call out to you, for this we awoke before dawn) and "Juan Pablo, hermano, ya eres Mexicano" (John Paul, brother, now you are Mexican).

A moment of levity was provided when a man made up as the Indian Juan Diego sprinted down the papal route to cries of "Ey, Juan Diego!"

San Antonio's religious travelers had their own struggles during the frenzy of the four days leading up to the pope's arrival.

Few had time to sleep as they haunted the basilica, taking in the layout and seeking insider tips for possible access to the pope. Mary Sarmiento, tour guide for Alamo Coaches, and pilgrim Maria Teresa Ortiz spent day and night negotiating with papal representatives for a spot in the basilica, and, when that failed, with security officers for a secure spot in the street.

That was on top of a grueling 24-hour bus ride followed by day trips to Taxco and Puebla, along with scenic spots in Mexico City.

But despite the hardships, most religious travelers never lost sight of the spiritual quest that buoyed them.

"At my age, I might never come back again, so this is a very important trip," said Cristela Moreno, 72, overjoyed at seeing the pope.

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