A letter written by Truro, Iowa, farmer Joe Hays inviting Pope John Paul II to visit “rural America, the heartland and breadbasket of our nation,” initiated the first Papal visit west of the Mississippi River and the largest gathering of people in the state up to that time.

Pope John Paul II arrived late in the afternoon on a chilly autumn day. As his helicopter, “Angel One,” descended, the sun’s rays broke through the clouds, warming the estimated 350,000 people who had been waiting since early morning for the Pope’s arrival.

Upon landing, the Pope kneeled and kissed the ground. He blessed farmers as stewards of the land and told those who farm and those associated with it, “the church highly esteems your work.” He encouraged farmers to help end famine in the world.

Pope John Paul II’s words helped inspire the urgent relief campaign, Iowa SHARES. After an intensive, six-week effort, food and medicine were delivered to starving Cambodian refugees.