



disciples of all nations

1.6 MILLION YOUTH. 85 BISHOPS. 40,000 A

On a pilgrimage to WYD, hundreds of youth and young adults from the Diocese of Fort Worth experienced the joy and diversity of the Catholic Church

FOR CHRIS ACEVEDO, VISITING HOLY SITES IN ROME, THEN TRAVELING TO KRAKOW, POLAND FOR WORLD YOUTH DAY 2016 WAS THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME.

“Going to all the religious places I’ve only seen in pictures really amazed me,” said the 15-year-old Trinity High School sophomore.

Being in the presence of Pope Francis, and worshipping with 1.5 million young people from nearly every continent and nation, strengthened the teen’s prayer life.

“Seeing all these people from around the world who are Catholic like me was truly an incredible experience,” Acevedo added. “It definitely helped me grow in my faith.”

The St. Michael parishioner was one of 208 pilgrims from the Diocese of Fort Worth who attended World Youth Day — an international festival that allows young people to encounter Jesus Christ in the Gospel while surrounded by the universal Church. Initiated by Pope John Paul II in 1985, the event takes place every three years and gives young Catholics the opportunity to celebrate their faith in the company of the Holy Father.

Ensuring a close link between World Youth Day and the Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis chose the words of Jesus, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive

Pilgrims attend the Way of the Cross at Blonia Park during World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland July 29. (CNS photo/David W. Cerny, Reuters)

100 AMERICAN PILGRIMS. 6 DAYS. 1 FAITH. by Joan Kurkowski-Gillen

mercy,” as the theme for the 2016 gathering.

Prior to arriving in Poland, the Fort Worth contingent — representing 33 parishes — spent several days in Rome then journeyed to Assisi, Prague, Auschwitz, and the birthplace of St. John Paul II in Wadowice, Poland.

Before their journey began, Jason Spoolstra, diocesan director of youth ministry, prepared participants to expect the unexpected.

“I told them, it wasn’t a vacation or a trip. It’s a pilgrimage,” he stressed. “Part of a pilgrimage is sacrificing and offering things

up along with daily prayer and visiting the holy sites.”

And, although the World Youth Day experience was successful and inspiring, it did include moments of disappointment and struggle. The pilgrims walked long distances to the different venues and shrines in weather that was warmer than anticipated. Staying hydrated and eating meals off schedule was sometimes an issue.

“What made me realize we had such a special group was in the midst of these trials, God still blessed us with so much grace and mercy,” Spoolstra explained. “We felt his will



CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

THE PLACES



ROME



ASSISI



PRAGUE



AUSCHWITZ



WADOWICE



KRAKOW

FROM PAGE 19

and the youth had such a joyful spirit, even when we were tired, hungry, or thirsty.”

Several emotional moments highlighted the July 19-August 1 pilgrimage for many participants. While visiting Rome, the Fort Worth pilgrims celebrated Mass with Bishop Michael Olson at the Altar of the Chair of St. Peter in St. Peter's Basilica. The bronze-gilded sculpture, above the famous altar, houses the remains of what many believe is the chair St. Peter used when he preached in Rome.

The papal basilica was relatively empty when the diocesan group arrived for the early morning Mass.

“Later in the day, there were tons of people around, so I really appreciated the intimacy of that Mass,” said Alyssa Gapinski, a parishioner at St. Frances Cabrini in Granbury. “It’s a wonderful memory.”

The 23-year-old college graduate learned about World Youth Day in Krakow during a Bible study class. An avid traveler, she decided to go on the trip and encouraged a couple of friends to go with her.

“Seeing a little bit of my Polish heritage along with other Catholics was something I was really excited about,” Gapinski said.

But the enormity of the event surprised and impressed the Michigan native. Watching Pope Francis arrive in Blonia Park for the welcoming ceremony was a sight she’ll never forget.

“We could see his little car driving around and he got pretty close to us,” she added. “I knew there would be a million people there but never in my life have I been in the same area with that many people.”

Knowing everyone in the throng of humanity shared the same faith was an

For more on World Youth Day, including blog posts from the Fort Worth pilgrims please visit northtexascatholic.org/wyd

overwhelming reality.

“For them to be Catholic too was the most moving thing I experienced on the trip.”

During their stay in Poland, the diocesan group also visited and celebrated Mass at the Shrine of Divine Mercy. The Krakow church is the resting place of St. Faustina Kowalska, a Polish nun and mystic whose apparitions of Jesus Christ inspired devotion to the Novena of Divine Mercy.

Delayed by long lines to tour the shrine and image of Divine Mercy, the group was late in leaving for a Matt Maher concert and Holy Hour at Krakow’s Tauron Arena. As they readied for another long walk to the venue, a priest came out of the shrine carrying a large monstrance signaling the start of an outdoor liturgy.

Spoolstra said his first reaction was to get the group moving toward the arena. God had other plans.

“Everyone was already walking toward the monstrance and it was as if Christ

was saying, ‘be with me here right now’ so we stayed,” the organizer said.

The Fort Worth pilgrims ended up praying the Divine Mercy chaplet at the Divine Mercy Shrine at the Divine Mercy hour.

“It was an opportunity that wasn’t planned. It just happened and turned out to be incredible,” Spoolstra enthused.

The young people never attended the crowded concert at the arena. By the time they arrived, the doors were closed for safety reasons.

“It was a disappointment but, if we had



A young woman prays during the opening Mass for World Youth Day July 26 at Blonia Park in Krakow, Poland. (CNS photo/Bob Roller)

VISITING POPE JOHN PAUL II'S HOMETOWN



"I
celebrated
Mass
for our
pilgrims at
the church

where JP II was baptized, confirmed, and received Holy Communion in his hometown of Wadowice. I prayed in the small flat where his father and he lived. It has been very special for me. Very moving and meaningful. I now have my example as a bishop."

left when we were supposed to, the group would not have had the experience at the Divine Mercy chapel," he conceded. "We felt it was providential that God had us there. It was a key moment."

For many teenage pilgrims, getting to know two pontiffs better was another advantage of World Youth Day. Chris Acevedo saw Pope Francis pass by in a motorcade and heard his message of love and mercy with other young people. He also has a new appreciation for St. John Paul II after touring an artifact-filled museum and seeing the small apartment where the Polish-born pope grew up.

"I was four when he died so I have no



World Youth Day pilgrims hold candles during Eucharistic Adoration with Pope Francis at the July 30 prayer vigil at the Field of Mercy in Krakow, Poland. (CNS photo/Jaclyn Lippelmann, Catholic Standard)



The Fort Worth Diocese pilgrims spent two-weeks discovering the richness of the Church and deepening their faith. This sometimes included braving the elements, as seen in this photo taken at Blonia Park for the papal welcome July 28. (Photo courtesy Chris West)

memory of him," the teenager admitted. "The museum was so full of information; I learned a lot of things I didn't know before."

Alyssa Gapinski is already looking forward to the next World Youth Day set for Panama — another country that figures largely in her family tree. Her maternal grandmother was born there.

"I honestly urge younger kids to go," she said emphatically.

"We know there are millions of Catholics, but to see it, and realize there are young people halfway across the world who share the same beliefs you do, is a great way to connect with others and learn about the world around you."

SEEKING GOD'S PATH VOCATIONS

An Encounter for Change *At World Youth Day*

BY FATHER JAMES WILCOX



Father James Wilcox was ordained to the priesthood in 2013 and serves as the Vocations Director for the Diocese of Fort Worth.

I FINALLY SUCCUMBED TO THE WEATHER AND DUG THE WORLD YOUTH DAY-ISSUED PONCHO OUT OF MY BACKPACK. I TEND TO NEVER CARRY AN UMBRELLA AND WILL JUST RUN THROUGH THE RAIN FROM MY CAR TO THE BUILDING.

Getting a little wet never hurt anyone. As a priest who serves the souls in Fort Worth, I learned quickly that we never complain about rain. But this time I was not moving from vehicle to shelter; I was in the midst of joy-filled young adults from the diocese at the WYD papal welcome. So, the poncho became a necessity.

The rain was a true blessing as it kept us cool on this summer day in Krakow, Poland while we waited for the Vicar of Christ, Pope Francis. During this time, the young people on the pilgrimage shared stories of the journey so far.

We began this journey with Jesus Christ in the Eternal City of Rome, including the celebration of beautiful Masses at the historic basilicas. For most on the pilgrimage, the Mass celebrated by Bishop Olson at the Altar of the Chair of St. Peter was a distinct highlight to that point.

However, now here we were — a plane flight and long bus ride away in Krakow and a bit of a hike to Blonia Park, participating in World Youth Day activities and welcoming the Holy Father to the events. Blonia Park is a large open field divided into various sections to help organize the people and provide for a flow of foot traffic. As we would see in a few moments, it also provides a pathway for Pope Francis to come amongst the excited pilgrims in the popemobile. While we waited for him, there was music, entertainment, and people waving flags from their countries. (Of course we Texans proudly included the Lone Star flag as well!)

All this preparation and journeying and excitement can lead one to wonder the point of the whole excursion. The Holy Father answered that question quickly once he arrived and was able to greet us pilgrims: "So many young people from such a variety of nations, cultures, and languages but with one aim, that of celebrating Jesus who is living in our midst. Do you understand this? To celebrate Jesus who is living in our midst!"

The focus of 2 million pilgrims at WYD was not the walking, or the rain, or the flags, or the entertainment, or even the opportunity to visit a beautiful country like Poland. When we walked in the footsteps of St. John Paul II toward Blonia Park, it was all to have an encounter with Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Through that encounter, we sought to understand the will of God and to receive the grace of courage to align our will with his.

In essence, all pilgrimages are journeys toward Jesus Christ. Our life is a pilgrimage. However, in a special way, the journey toward Christ is more intimate for the man who answers the call to priesthood or the young woman who is beacons to religious life. The call to serve, especially in the priesthood, is always a call from Jesus Christ. When one sets out on the pilgrim journey of faith, he or she must be open to knowing that we may be called to an extraordinary life of service.

At the welcome, Pope Francis asked the young people if they wanted a life with a lasting sense of fulfillment. He helped them answer the question: "To find fulfillment, to gain new life, there is a way, a way that is not for sale, that cannot be purchased, a way that is not a thing or an object, but a person. His name is Jesus Christ."

Those on pilgrimage know about relin-

quishing items that burden one during the journey. When the focus is a person — Jesus Christ — the things that we possess and the things that possess us become expendable. We strongly desire to reach the destination and to encounter the person of Christ, so we shake off materialistic needs, prideful habits, and selfish actions. When the love of the person to whom we journey grows deeper, we desire to have others with us on the journey. We seek to help them learn about the journey, join the journey, and have an experience of Jesus Christ.

While the beginning of the papal welcome was a little wet and required ponchos and umbrellas, the rain disappeared in time for the popemobile to drive through the crowds and for Pope Francis to arrive on stage. The Lord granted us comfort and a respite on this journey, which can be seen as a moment of grace.

Throughout the entire pilgrimage for World Youth Day with the diocese, the call to priesthood was heard and the call to religious life was felt — especially in our more than 200 traveling companions. These youth were serious about listening to the Lord, through the exhilaration of the pope's presence as well as during the difficulties of a long hot walk. May the flames ignited on this pilgrimage serve to light the path of their journey to serve the Lord.

It is now the task and the responsibility of all Catholics in the Diocese of Fort Worth to pray fervently for these young people, that they may have the courage to answer the call to follow Jesus Christ.

