

INTERNATIONAL GATHERING OF WYD ORGANISERS
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The impact of WYD in Asia

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A. Asian Youth Stories

The Union of Catholic Asian News faithfully covered the World Youth Day in Sydney through various interviews, news updates and opinion articles on the event and with the young Asians as their primary subjects. Let us take a look at some reflections they have of the WYD:

I have learned the importance of unity and reconciliation, and that has made me feel more confident and motivated, said Shahzad, who lives in Hyderabad, 150 kilometers northeast of Karachi (Pakistan). In his view, such activities are needed for Christian youths "living silently" in this Muslim-majority country.

Deviana Wijaya of Bandung diocese in West Java, Indonesia told UCANews on August 2, *One big lesson I have taken from WYD is about giving. We should just give and give, and never think of what we'll get back.* He also said *WYD really gave me a strong impression of togetherness, peace and solidarity.*

Hin Rothana, of St. Joseph Parish in Phnom Penh, Cambodia: *I cannot speak English,* he admitted, but added he made many new friends *through body language.* The youth said he appreciated the music during the WYD events. *I didn't understand the lyrics, but listening to the music made me fall silent in the heart even though there were thousands of young people around me.*

As I had scrawled on a pilgrims' wall just a few days previously: *We have come from Singapore to meet Jesus! And there, in the Blessed Sacrament, I met Jesus.* And I understood that had I not had such a terribly disappointing day, I would not have been able to experience the God of comfort in such a wonderful way.

I have seen mutual international friendship. It strengthens my faith. Our host families were lovely. They treated us as if we were their children, added Busaraphan Bootsala, a young man from Chiang Mai province, northern Thailand.

The experience *urged me to lead a life in the spirit and try to be a witness to Christ,* Adrian Ho said. Already an altar server at Blessed Sacrament Church in Kuching, eastern Malaysia, Adrian said he is now motivated to become a lector and take an active role in the parish youth ministry.

Sirikunya Makullawanichnun, 34, said *seeing a group of tribal youths receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation* impressed her most as Thai youth coordinator. *Some said they hadn't received the sacrament for five years. Most of them had forgotten how to confess. However, the Holy Spirit changed that and kindled in them the fire of God's love,* she recalled.

These stories suggest the impact World Youth Day has created among Asian young Catholics. In a discussion with fourteen (14) heads of youth commissions within Asia, these heads shared that youth delegates from their countries found the event significant for many reasons:

a. It provides an experience of the universal church.

With only 3% Christians in this most populated region in the world, the WYD helps young Asians experience what it is to belong to the Catholic community. Celebrating the Mass in a language not their own, praying with people from all over the world, listening to the same truth spoken to them in catechism but presented in different approaches, they realize that they are not alone in living the faith. They are with millions of others who center their life in Jesus.

b. It helps them to celebrate and enjoy their young life as Catholics.

Especially for young Asians coming from countries with socialist governments and places where poverty and strife are ordinary realities of life, the WYD gives them time to celebrate and appreciate the gift of being young. With youthful music, song, dance, and other lively elements expressed in the various WYD events, they are encouraged to appreciate their giftedness and explore possibilities for growth around them. Their encounters with counterparts from all over the world enable them not only to see the world in a different way, but also to appreciate more the basic essentials in life.

c. It develops community spirit among them.

Journeying as one delegation, sharing stories, going through struggle and pains and dreaming together, they become a church – a small community desiring to see God in others and in themselves. In the process, leadership capacities are also enhanced. This makes for fertile ground for deeper ministry for the young.

d. It renews them in their faith: discovering Jesus and the Church.

The experience is life-changing to young Asians. The formative experiences as well as the spaces for contemplation and communal worship help them grow in faith and to understand it better. Coming back, they feel empowered to share their faith and to live it radically. Many of them volunteer their services to the parish, while still others discover their vocation to the priesthood or consecrated life.

B. Asian Church and Youth Ministry

Most Catholic churches in Asia have already developed their own structure to care for the needs of their young populace. While some countries like India, the Philippines, and even Indonesia have a very clear and systematic structure for their youth ministries, many, like Laos, Mongolia and Cambodia, are still young as their local churches are also slowly emerging. Yet, despite these diversities, it is interesting to note that most of these countries organize a contingent for the WYD. Mongolia, for instance, sent fifteen (15) young people out of only five hundred twenty-five (525) Catholics throughout the country. It might even be the most well represented Catholic church in

Sydney! Vietnam had more than three hundred (300) delegates in the recent WYD, a far cry from its very small contingent in the past.

a. WYD, a major youth ministry event

Youth commissions also take the WYD as a major event in their youth calendar. Through the years, they have developed their own mechanism to make the tedious process of organizing effective and efficient. Some commissions, like Hong Kong, create a separate committee and employ personnel to handle the process of promotion, screening of delegates, and coordinating WYD-related activities with them. Dioceses are also given the proper orientation for endorsing delegates so they are screened from the parish up to the national level. In the aspect of finance, despite the economic realities in our region, it is amazing how countries are able to raise funds and how groups are willing to expend resources. In the Philippines, various creative approaches have been employed by would-be delegates to raise funds. From the classic solicitation letters and request for second collections in Masses, some young people also raise funds by organizing concerts, house to house serenading, crafts making, and others.

But there are also countries, Nepal, for instance, which chose not to send any official delegation. According to a church official in the apostolic vicariate, *The Church in Nepal had given youths the opportunity to attend such events in the past, but the results were not satisfactory*. He said he wanted the youths to attend such events and put into practice what they learned, *but this has not happened so far here in Nepal*. The other reason for the Church not sending youths to WYD this year, he added, was that a Catholic youth from Nepal went missing during the last international WYD celebration, in Germany in 2005.

These sentiments are not isolated. Many youth ministers have also expressed the constant fear of losing people in the WYD. This is especially true in Southeast and South Asia, where people have migrated to other countries for more financial stability. As the financial crisis looms all over the region, this occurrence will surely continue in the next WYDs.

At the same time, the huge amount needed to send each delegate is enough to finance several programs for young people in a diocese or a parish. While the spirit of solidarity and oneness achieved by the event is incomparable, there might be more pressing concerns in the local level which the young need to face.

b. Pre-WYD Programs

1. Catechesis

Pre-WYD formation programs are organized by most countries. This is a venue to prepare their delegates spiritually for the event. Thai youth, for example, have studied the WYD 2008 theme, learned about the 10 patron saints, and reflected on Pope Benedict XVI's message for the WYD 2008 as preparation. In other countries like India and the Philippines, pre-WYD programs are made available to dioceses so that it can be used for their local formation. Implementation, however, is left to the decision of the dioceses. In Shanghai, China, the diocese held its very first national youth day before the WYD in Sydney. Adopting the same theme of the WYD 2008, three hundred (300) youth, including some who are non-Catholics, gathered in Sacred Heart Parish for a whole day of prayer, teaching, and community building.

2. Celebration

Before the WYD 2008, some countries had the opportunity to have the WYD Cross and Icon of Our Lady go on pilgrimage in their dioceses. This became a spiritual experience not only for delegates but for the entire church. In Dili, where the WYD Cross and Icon stayed for four (4) days, about five thousand (5,000) people accompanied the Cross and Icon in the different parishes of Dili. This became a moment of solidarity for the church, as people prayed for forgiveness. Bishop da Silva said *it is time for young people to forgive each other, turn away from sin, in order to bring this country on the right path of development. According to the report, many young Catholics have admitted participation in crimes such as gang violence, theft and arson after a military mutiny was staged in April 2006.*

The same experience happened in Korea, the Philippines, and other Asian countries where the Cross and Icon went on pilgrimage.

3. Community Life

There are countries that also offer teambuilding experiences for their delegations, to help them to relate with each other better during the WYD and after. Asian countries are typically multi-lingual and multi-racial. Preparing the delegates coming from different ethnicities is a pastoral challenge, but it is also an opportunity for community building.

In Sri Lanka, Tamil and Sinhalese delegates learned to share cultural differences, and came to a common vision for peace-building in their war-torn country. *It is a great gift to get a general idea of the condition of Lankan youths*, said Philip Sanjeeva Ranasinghe, 21, a Sinhalese student from Galle diocese. He said the group discussed the *common ideas to share with the world youths*. In addition to uniting in prayer, meditation and Mass, the youths practiced the Sinhalese *Kandyan* dance, the Tamil *Bharathanatyam* dance, and a common dance for members of both communities.

c. Post-WYD Programs

1. A Call to Action

The experience of WYD has encouraged some youth delegations towards a common response to action. Indonesia, which has experienced major calamities in the last couple of years, has pledged for environmental campaign even before the WYD. When they attended the Green World Youth Day campaign in Sydney, Indonesian delegates united in a common plan of action for environment when they return. *We need to launch a common movement, such as peaceful action against companies whose operations may destroy the environment*, asserted an Indonesian young lady. For her own part, she said, *I will ask young friends to care for the environment by collecting garbage and planting trees.*

Likewise, members of some youth movements (i.e. IYCS, IYCW, IMCS, and MIJARC) rooted in Asia responded to the call of the Spirit to become witnesses. They have committed themselves to six goals:

1. Be active in the struggle against hunger, poverty, discrimination and exclusion, and work toward a world of justice and peace.
2. Think and act responsibly in personal life and in community in support of the U.N. Millennium Goals.
3. Call upon young people to share experiences and energies in social, political and economic issues.

4. Call Church and civil society leaders to support and encourage young people in action to eradicate poverty, hunger.
5. Call Church leaders to witness to young people, of faith lived in actions of justice and equality.
6. Call civil society to hold governments accountable to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

Vietnam and some other countries organized a collective response, such as going to rural places to share their lives with other young people, and also providing experiences for them.

Few however have reported having a comprehensive plan of action not only involving the delegates but the local church as well. Though as earlier reported, many youths commit themselves to work for the Church, the WYD does not provide a scheme for the mission to be actualized. With the various challenges each region and country is facing, there is a need to enable the young to become aware of global and local issues, reflect on them in the light of the teachings of the Church, and respond together. This will enable them to dialogue with life and live their faith in the context of everyday realities.

2. WYD Reunions

After the WYD, delegates normally experience a special bond among co-pilgrims. Most countries reported that because of this, even without a structure, delegates create opportunities to continue the link and grow in relationship with their companions. Some have set up their own websites so that photos can be downloaded and personal reflections can be continually shared. Some have prayer gatherings and fellowships together.

However, these reunions seem short lived, since there is no structure and clear goal to achieve for the group. Besides, the group that is created cannot really survive, as young people come from different parts of the country.

If a parish community, however, has a structure where the youth delegate can be absorbed and where s/he can feel a sense of belonging, her/his experience of community will continue. While this happens in some instances, a youth ministry plan that is rooted in the realities of young people and the vision of the local church will make this possible.

In this regard, youth commissions, with all the youth ministers present in the WYD, should also be provided a means to reflect on the theme of the WYD in the level of ministry. Furthermore, some directives can be given so that what is taken up during these events will be helpful in the overall accompaniment the local church has for the young.

3. WYD Follow-up Sessions

After the WYD, many young pilgrims desire for a continuous experience, especially in the area of formation or catechesis.

Catechesis in the WYD ideally provides foundation in Scriptures and Church teachings, for young people to imbibe the chosen theme in their daily lives. Some bishop-catechists chosen for this purpose have helped many of our pilgrims to grow in their faith and thirst more for the truth. However, some pilgrims did not have the same experience with their bishop-catechists.

There is a need for catechesis to be more relevant to issues of the young, to be more youth-friendly and participatory. Likewise, issues like inter-religious dialogue, should find a space in catechesis. Further, the team approach, employed by some catechesis animation teams from Asian countries with their bishop-catechists, proved helpful. Lay leaders animate the program with songs, games, sharing and creative prayer linked with the theme of the day, while the bishops provide the sound teaching. Aside from producing the desired results, the medium, which is teamwork, becomes the message. An example for youth ministers to exemplify—youth ministry with, for and by the youth.

C. Summary

On the whole, the entire WYD journey provides the Asian church a framework by which the Church can minister to the young: journeying with the young through formation, community building, and mission, among many others.

However, if youth ministry is seen as a developmental ministry and not just as a one-shot event, it should be able to help in developing structures and strategies for youth commissions to take up the theme for on-going ministry in the local level.

If it is seen as a ministry of the church, it ought to touch base with reality, allowing the young to dialogue with global and local issues around them.

If youth ministry is pro-active and result-oriented, the WYD should enable delegations to move towards change, transforming their societies by their presence and contribution.

We hope for deeper dialogue and collaboration between the country host, the PCL and youth commissions so that the youth ministers themselves can be considered as the crucial link in making the vision of WYD operative not only in the days of the celebration but beyond.

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