

INTERNATIONAL GATHERING OF WYD ORGANISERS
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The impact of WYD in Burundi

Abbé Salvator Niciteretse
Secrétaire de la Commission Episcopale pour L'apostolat des Laïcs (CEAL)
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FORUMS AND GATHERINGS OF YOUNG PEOPLE THAT ARE INSPIRED BY WYD AND ARE THE RESULTS OF WYD

We shall deal here with forums and gatherings of young people at parish, diocesan, national and regional levels that were supported by the Episcopal Commission for Lay Apostolate in collaboration with the diocesan commissions for lay apostolate. We shall also speak about the pilgrimage of the WYD Cross in Burundi and about the Burundi National Youth Cross, and we shall conclude with the impact of WYD on Burundi.

I. PARISH AND DIOCESAN FORUMS AND YOUTH GATHERINGS

The first national forum in Burundi took place in August 2005 at the same time as WYD was taking place in Cologne. However, there had previously been forums in the diocese of Bujumbura since 2003 with the support of the Emmanuel Community. Since that time there has been an annual national forum as well as several parish, vicariate and diocesan forums and gatherings. For the national forums we invite representatives from neighbouring countries like Rwanda, RDC and Tanzania. Sometimes representatives come from western countries. Since 2006 we have had at least three forums per year of three to five days duration in each diocese. Some dioceses like the Archdiocese of Gitega have had up to seven forums each year, and this does not include gatherings organised in the parishes. These forums and gatherings take place in a climate of faith, prayer and devotion.

Huge numbers of young people join these gatherings. For the year 2008 the total number who have taken part in one-day gatherings throughout the country amounts to over 200,000 young people, and the forums of three to five days have been attended by around 70,000. These figures refer to the gatherings and forums that have involved the Episcopal Commission for Lay Apostolate which has given financial support and some of the talks. There have been several parish forums and youth gatherings organised without the assistance of the CEAL.

Most of these young people are members of Catholic Action movements and others are from the new communities. They contribute generously and voluntarily to the organisation of these forums, and then they in turn organise them in parishes and attract thousands of young people.

We would also like to emphasise that in all these forums, our bishop pastors and numerous priests and religious are always present to accompany the youth with spiritual and moral help and to give them catechesis. The presence of the Apostolic Nuncio at the forums contributes to the dimension of the universal Church and encourages our youth.

We would also like to point out that the International Forum of Catholic Action (IFCA) has supported the CEAL in coordinating and training young people in Burundi, Rwanda and the Kivu

Region of RDC. IFCA also helps us to better coordinate them for all-round training that will help them to become more involved in pastoral ministry.

II. THE WYD CROSS AND ICON OF OUR LADY IN BURUNDI FROM 19 OCTOBER TO 2 NOVEMBER 2006: greatest impact

These precious signs of our faith were expected to arrive at Bujumbura international airport on 19 October 2006 coming from Congo-Brazzaville. Unfortunately, they did not arrive until 23 October, and they had to leave on 2 November 2006.

In spite of this setback, the pilgrimage of the WYD Cross and Icon of Our Lady in Burundi saw a massive participation of Christians, particularly young people, during the pilgrimage throughout the dioceses of Burundi. Of a population of eight million of whom sixty-five per cent are Catholic, over 700,000 people welcomed these sacred symbols of our faith with great devotion. The veneration and respect shown by the Christians for the Cross and Icon as they passed was obvious to all. Some of them fell to their knees, others pressed forward in order to touch the Cross and Icon, reminding us of when Jesus was on the lake, on a mountain or in the villages and the people hastened to reach him in order to hear his words and to be healed by touching him.

Miracles took place. The rain fell continuously wherever the Cross went on this pilgrimage, yet there had been a lack of rain before that time. As the Cross passed by, some people were healed of their infirmities. Members of other religious confessions and other Christians joined with their Catholic neighbours to welcome and venerate the Cross and Icon of Our Lady. We noticed the presence of Muslims and Protestants.

The bishops, priests and religious welcomed the Cross and Icon with devotion and faith. They spent days and nights with the people praying. This can be said also for the priests and the team of six people who accompanied the Cross throughout the country. The priests sometimes heard confessions until four o'clock in the morning.

The Cross and Icon were generally well received in Burundi. This pilgrimage renewed and reaffirmed the faith of the Christians of Burundi in general and of the youth in particular. Continuity was provided by the Burundi National Youth Cross that was blessed by our bishops on 17 August 2007 in Ngozi. That pilgrimage was certainly of huge impact in affirming the faith of the Christians of Burundi and in particular of the young people.

III. PILGRIMAGE OF THE NATIONAL YOUTH CROSS IN THE DIOCESE OF NGOZI: continuing the impact of the WYD Cross

The National Youth Cross of Burundi that was blessed by our Bishop pastors on 17 August 2007 at the third National Youth Forum in Ngozi went on a year-long pilgrimage throughout the diocese of Ngozi. It passed through all the parishes and ecclesial communities before being passed on to the diocese of Muyinga.

The words of the Bishops of Burundi delivered during the blessing of this Cross are written on the plaque: **“Dear young people, receive this Cross as a sign of God’s love for humanity and as a sign of unity and reconciliation as Christ commanded us”**.

As in the pilgrimage of the WYD Cross, each community celebrates with a solemn Mass of the Glorious Cross, adoration of the Cross, the Way of the Cross, Marian prayer, prayer vigils until dawn (1500 to 2000 people) and confessions.

Catechesis on the meaning of the Cross are given before, during and after the pilgrimage of the

National Cross. This pilgrimage certainly brings about many spiritual benefits. Over 182,620 people from different parishes and areas took part with faith and devotion at the various welcome ceremonies for the National Cross in 2008 in the diocese of Ngozi.

Other consequences of the WYD Cross visit to Burundi

- These youth forums and gatherings help **to refocus the faith and lives of young people on the person of Jesus Christ** who reconciles us while he hangs from the Cross and makes us brothers and sisters. For this purpose there is a pilgrimage of thousands of young people with the National Youth Cross and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament throughout the night that concludes with Mass. The faith of young people, currently threatened by the proliferation of sects and the rapid expansion of Islam, is given new strength.
- **The utopia of universal fellowship can be felt**: young people from different ethnic groups are hosted with families they do not know. At the beginning they are afraid they will be killed, but after three or five days, they become friends of these host families. Youth networks for peace are started with young people in other dioceses or in neighbouring countries.
- **The desire to experience the joy of faith**: Young people experience the joy of faith during youth forums and gatherings. For this reason many parishes ask for these events to take place in their areas.
- **Youth engagement**: Young people strive for a culture of peace, reconciliation and forgiveness in a country where the social fabric has been torn by war and ethnic, regional and political rivalries. When the young people in the Catholic Action and spirituality movements are given responsibility and become more active in their parishes and Church groups, they begin to take responsibility for many youth activities.
- **A youth network in the sub-region**: A youth network is being set up to foster a mature and responsible faith and a culture of peace and reconciliation between Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is for this purpose that the youth of these three countries invite each other to their forums in order to exchange experiences of faith and look at the challenges that stand in the way of peace and reconciliation or that erode human dignity in the sub-region. From 29 July to 3 August 2009 a similar forum will take place in Bujumbura if the means allow.

I cannot conclude this talk without paying tribute to the wonderful response of the young people and their spirit of sacrifice and self-giving for the sake of others. I also wish to point out that our bishops show great interest in these forums. They remain with the young people and take an active part in the activities organised each day. We are very grateful to the International Forum of Catholic Action (IFCA), Catholic Action in Spain, the Fund for Evangelisation in Spain and the Episcopal Commission for Lay Apostolate in France who have supported us financially as well as in organisation. As long as parallel WYDs are not organised in Africa, African participation will be limited for financial reasons, and also on account of those young people who do not want to return to their country of origin because they are in search of a better future.

May Pope Jean Paul II, founder of WYDs, be canonised!