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WYD 2008: pastoral impact in Australia

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At the end of the Final Mass Pope Benedict commissioned our young people to take the Holy Spirit out from the biggest gathering in our nation's history and renew the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit - Australia. What pastoral effect has WYD had on our country?

Lots of people are doing research on the pastoral impacts of WYD. This will be useful for our pastoral follow-up and for future hosts.

As part of a research project called "Pilgrims' Progress 2008" university researchers interviewed thousands of pilgrims before, during and after WYD. I will provide a summary report on that research today. I also contacted all the bishops of Australian and NZ to ask for their impressions.

(The respondents are English speaking. 75% of the respondents were under 36 years of age, and a third of these were still at school. Over 60% resided in Australia or New Zealand; the next largest group were from USA and Canada (almost 20%); over 10% were from South and South East Asia, and about 8% from the UK, Ireland and a few countries of Europe. Only 15% had been to a previous World Youth Day.)

The researchers found that "Participants rated the experience of attending WYD very highly: seven out of ten considered it 'one of the best experiences of my life' or even 'a life-changing event'."

What pilgrims said they found most spiritually helpful was the experience of the Church: sensing that God was present in this large gathering of people, sharing and celebrating the same faith, transcending them in space and time, joining them with others and with God.

Of the major group events, the Vigil, the Final Mass and the Via Crucis stood out for the pilgrims as the place they experienced God.

Catechesis featured as the most important of the other activities for the pilgrims.

Returnees reported major changes in beliefs, attitudes, behaviour and sense of Catholic identity, which they attributed to their participation in WYD. I want now to report on 5 particular pastoral outcomes of WYD08.

The first fruit of WYD as of any Gospel event is conversions. Over 40% of pilgrims reported that their faith in God had been strengthened, and that they had a closer relationship with Jesus because of WYD.

Bishops and youth leaders from all over the world have written to us stories of conversions at WYD.

A bishop tells this story of conversion: “A family I know came to Australia some years ago as refugees from El Salvador. The father is alcoholic and has created a terrible distance between himself and his children. The older sons went to World Youth Day to escape this situation for a little while. They told their mother they just wanted to have a great time in Sydney and would not be attending the religious events. But they agreed to meet their mother at the Vigil on Saturday.

“She was amazed at what she heard when she met her two boys. They have been to most of the WYD events and were so happy. They stayed with their Mother through the night of the Vigil and the Mass with the Holy Father. She was relieved and astounded by their new spirit.

“Since WYD the boys have formed a parish youth group and a music group. They are trying as a family to work through their difficulties. On New Year’s Eve, rather than go to a party with their friends, they went with their mother to midnight Mass. She is overjoyed that her sons have been so changed.”

(Bishop Donald Sproxton of Perth)

Some nuns tell the story of meeting two students from mainland China who knew practically nothing about Christianity and encouraged them to follow them to the Opening Mass; the sisters gave them a crash catechism course and the Chinese youths were crying by the time of the Consecration.

(See Sr Mary Gabriel sv, “Let the fire fall,” *Fidelity* August 2008, 5-7)

One pilgrim said that the Final Mass was the highlight for her. She remembered Pope Benedict asking the pilgrims: ‘What will you leave the future generation?’ Her answer now is: my faith. “Something happened that morning that has changed me forever. At the consecration of Jesus’ Body and Blood I finally understood what it all meant. After all those years of going to Mass I at last understood how much God really loves me.” (Hanna Lyra, Pilgrim from Perth)

It wasn’t only the pilgrims who were affected. One bishop tells of a frail elderly agnostic woman who watched the WYD *Stations of the Cross* on TV and was unexpectedly deeply moved. When Jesus was placed in the arms of his mother, the tears poured from her eyes. Days passed and she felt quite different inside: more serene and hopeful. There was meaning in the autumn of her life, a special gift from Christ through WYD. (Bishop Chris Prowse of Melbourne)

A young man called Thomas told his bishop that he was ‘gobsmacked’ by WYD. (This word that might be a challenge for our translators.) He now has a web-site describing his conversion. The bishop said he was gobsmacked when he visited the website. World Youth Day has converted us bishops too! (Bishop Chris Prowse of Melbourne)

A second outcome has been a new confidence amongst our young people about their faith. Our researchers found that “A third or more of respondents stated that they were now not embarrassed to let others see that they believed; that they wanted to live as disciples of Jesus; that they wanted to learn more about their faith.”

One pilgrim wrote that dwindling church attendance and negative media makes people think the Church is stale or dead. WYD proved to him the opposite is true. He quoted Cardinal Pell at the opening Mass: “The Church is alive and the Church is young.” (Christian Irdi, Pilgrim)

Some young people who felt isolated in their parishes said they returned with a new sense of hope. A young person told her bishop: We have been given permission to shine!

An 18 year old returnee told the bishop of Geraldton in North West Australia that WYD convinced her “God is real!” (Bishop Justin Bianchini of Geraldton)

A third pastoral impact of WYD has been in young people engaging in new kinds of service. Researchers found that “Over half of the respondents said that they were determined to change their behaviour towards others – to be more considerate, more ‘Christ-like’.”

One bishop tells how his pilgrims are now assuming rôles of leadership and service in the diocese: head boy and girl in the biggest secondary school; taking communion to sick Aboriginal people; visiting nursing homes; new parish youth groups; building up their struggling youth ministry. (Bishop Justin Bianchini of Geraldton)

One bishop reports that where Parish Councils used to blame young people for not being present at church, now they ask: how can we make them feel at home in our parish life and celebrations? (Bishop Joe Grech of Sandhurst))

A Director of Religious Education in a NZ secondary school says that almost all the outstanding candidates for leadership rôles in his school are returnee pilgrims who are now excited about sharing their faith with others.

Young men found their priestly vocations at WYD, as these two testimonies illustrate.

A fourth set of outcomes have been in the area of diocesan and parish renewal

One bishop testifies that WYD brought together all sorts of people in a common project and that this has opened up new possibilities for collaboration in his far flung diocese. (Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Canberra-Goulburn)

This Archbishop thought the Journey of the WYD cross and icon is a brilliantly conceived dynamic for moving people to faith. (Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Canberra-Goulburn)

Another bishop reported that the Cross and Icon are the John the Baptist heralding WYD and bringing it even to remote Aborigines in his diocese.

It was the young people who did much of the preaching, just by their manner. This bishop celebrates the impact of their youthful exuberance, joy-filled presence, deep living faith. They charmed the hardest hearts and lifted our spirits. (Bishop Michael Malone of Maitland-Newcastle)

The Metropolitan Archbishop of NZ says WYD has given not only Australia but NZ a real pastoral injection.

WYD also had impacts on the wider community.

This newspaper poll found that Sydney loved WYD and that after some grumbling before the event, most people thought it was great. The same was true right across our country.

Government officials, police, business leaders, members of other churches and religions – all were impressed by our Pope and especially by our young people.

(“The Premier, government officials and people in Melbourne spoke very highly about the presence of the young people in Melbourne during the Days in the Dioceses and their obvious faith and love for the Church that gave a new impetus to our city in what was a very cold week.” - Archbishop Denis Hart of Melbourne)

(“In Bourke the police and Aboriginal men shared a time when they carried the WYD Cross from the Darling River to Holy Spirit Church. There are sometimes tensions between these two groups, but we have a sense that some real; healing took place that day.” - Bishop Chris Toohey of Wilcannia-Forbes)

(“It happened in Geelong in January 2008 when we had the Cross and Icon. We decided to visit a couple of Orthodox Churches in the neighbourhood. The real magic came from the Russian Orthodox, when the priest asked me and the 150 people who came, “Why do you come?” I told him: “To build a bond of love and unity.” Tears came to his eyes. He broke out in a hymn and then told me to wait as he went into the sanctuary to get the Eagle rug which, in the East, is the symbol of the presence and also, office of the bishop. This gesture broke down a lot of barriers and tensions between our churches which have a long history of events. We sang hymns and I was given the privilege of entering the sanctuary. We stayed longer than planned, but left with a far greater love and tolerance amongst our churches.” - Eparch Peter Stasiuk of the Ukrainian Catholics of Australia & NZ)

Our university researchers asked the returnees **what kind of follow-up to WYD** would help them most...

55% of WYD returnees want retreats or camps to help grow in faith. So we have established a new centre in a rural setting just outside Sydney where retreats and formation courses are offered.

45% of WYD returnees said they want regular get-togethers after WYD. These have occurred all over the country. Xt3, our post-WYD social networking site, has encouraged such participation.

Nearly half the WYD returnees want national gatherings of young Catholics and a quarter want opportunities for dialogue with church leaders. So the Australian Bishops sponsored a major follow-up meeting of youth leaders and ministers from all over the country and adopted their recommendations for the future of youth ministry. They have also established a permanent Youth Council to continue to advise the Bishops and the local churches.

Our research found that 45% of WYD pilgrims want more youth-oriented Masses. These have increased markedly throughout Australia after WYD, often using WYD models such as catechesis before Mass and animation teams.

44% of WYD returnees say they want to hear good presentations of the Catholic faith. All the WYD addresses, images and video have been widely distributed for reflection and discussion. Some parishes and groups are holding regular catechesis using the WYD model. There are new national and regional programmes of evangelisation, catechesis or young adult education.

Several bishops have reported that the catechesis at WYD proved enormously effective and that they are now regularly offering similar catechetical experiences in their dioceses.

More than a third of the pilgrims say they want opportunities to use their gifts in the Church. This new energy has helped rejuvenate existing ministries and start some new ones in Australia.

The WYD Office produced Post-WYD materials to encourage young people to find new places to lead and to serve in the Church and community.

Researchers found that 29% of WYD returnees want opportunities for spiritual growth. Thus some parishes and groups are using WYD styles of prayer and devotion, such as using WYD08 music, the Holy Hour of Power, the Stations of the Cross.

One bishop tells how in his diocese they have erected 14 WYD crosses around the diocese, so young people's pilgrimages might continue.

Many WYD returnees asked for on-line resources for learning more about the Catholic faith. The DVDs of all the events have proven very popular, Xt3 offers new ways to discuss the Catholic faith, and the Bishops national evangelisation office has new programmes of instruction.

In conclusion: our early research demonstrates that WYD has had a very significant pastoral impact on Australia, especially in the areas of conversions, greater confidence amongst the young faithful, new kinds of service to the Church and community, diocesan and parish renewal, and effects on the wider community. There has been significant follow-up to capitalize on this new energy.

A last follow-up question which our researchers asked is: Do you plan to go to the next WYD in Madrid in 2011? More than half the respondents were confident they would be there in Madrid in 2011. Many are fund-raising already.

When asked "Would you recommend WYD 2011 in Madrid to someone who had not been to a WYD, 97.2% said YES. See you there!