

**INTERNATIONAL GATHERING OF WYD ORGANISERS**  
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**Points for reflection**  
**on WYD and youth ministry**

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**Introduction**

What can we say about WYD?

What is the vocation of WYD?

Why do we organise such gatherings?

Where does WYD fit in the Church's youth ministry?

How does WYD reveal the Church's pastoral ministry with young people?

John Paul II and Benedict XVI provide us with elements that respond to these questions, and we draw them from their addresses given over the past 25 years. What do they tell us?

**A. WHAT IS WYD?**

**1. John Paul II's prophetic insight**

Benedict XVI regards WYD as a prophetic insight that came to John Paul II.

*"... the establishment of World Youth Day, desired with prophetic insight by my unforgettable Predecessor (Benedict XVI, general audience after his return from Cologne, 24 August 2005).*

**2. Far more than solely an event!**

WYD is often accused of being just an event that consumes lots of energy and means without contributing to renewal in the ordinary lives of young people in the Church. To this accusation Benedict XVI responds:

*World Youth Day is much more than an event. It is a time of deep spiritual renewal, the fruits of which benefit the whole of society. Young pilgrims are filled with the desire to pray, to be nourished by Word and Sacrament, to be transformed by the Holy Spirit (Benedict XVI, general audience, 4 July 2007)*

### **3. The goal of WYD: to refocus young people's faith and life on the person of Jesus Christ**

Ideas are regularly presented from all over to improve the content of WYD or to renew it. For example, people dream of WYD offering testimony of youth engagement on behalf of peace, or the defence of life, or for justice in the world, or for the fight against poverty and discrimination, or on behalf of ecology. It could also contribute in the area of ecumenism or interfaith dialogue. All of these objectives could be very useful, very important and very appropriate.

But is this the goal of WYD? What are the criteria for discernment in order to choose one pastoral aim or another?

In order to find criteria for discernment, we must look at the goal of WYD and its special charism.

John Paul II defined the goal of WYD thus:

*The principal objective of World Youth Day is to focus the faith and life of every young person on the person of Jesus Christ so that Jesus may be their constant point of reference as well as the inspiration of every initiative and commitment for the education of the new generations. This is the 'maxim' of every Youth Day. Taken altogether throughout this decade, they have been an ongoing compelling call to build life and faith upon a rock, and that rock is Jesus Christ* (John Paul II, letter on the occasion of a seminar on WYD, 8 May 1996).

### **4. Going forth together to meet Christ**

Like his predecessor, Benedict XVI identifies WYD as a meeting with Christ:

*The solemn World Youth Days are nothing if not the culmination of a long process in which the young people turn to one another and then, together, turn to Christ. In Australia it was not by chance that the Way of the Cross, winding through the city, became the high point of those days. Once again, it summed up everything that had occurred in previous years, while pointing to the One who gathers us together: to that God who loves us all the way to the Cross. Thus, the Pope himself is not the star around which everything revolves. He is completely and solely a Vicar. He points beyond himself to the Other who is in our midst. In the end, the solemn liturgy is the centre of the whole event, because in it there takes place something that we ourselves cannot bring about, yet something for which we are always awaiting. Christ is present. He comes into our midst. The heavens are rent and the earth filled with light* (Benedict XVI, address to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2008).

### **5. Sending young people forth on pilgrimage along the roads of the world**

This meeting with Christ takes place during a pilgrimage, we are told by John Paul II.

*Young people are therefore called periodically to set out on pilgrimage along the roads of*

*the world.. The Church can see itself and its mission to humankind in these young people. With young people the Church faces the challenges of the future, at the same time being aware that all humanity needs to be rejuvenated in spirit. This pilgrimage of youth builds bridges of fellowship and hope between continents, peoples and cultures. This journey is in constant movement, just like life, and just like youth.* (John Paul II, letter on the occasion of a seminar on WYD, 8 May 1996).

## **6. To experience the joy of faith**

John Paul II and Benedict XVI emphasised that the joy of faith is one of the characteristics of WYD that they had observed:

*World Youth Days have proved to be “occasions for young people to profess and proclaim their faith in Christ with ever greater joy”* (John Paul II, letter on the occasion of a seminar on WYD, 8 May 1996).

*I have always felt a very special joy at these encounters* (Meeting with the youth at the Municipal Stadium in Pacaembu, São Paulo, Brazil, 10 May 2007).

*According to Scripture, joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22). This fruit was abundantly visible during those days in Sydney. [...] An integral part of any celebration is joy. A celebration can be organized, joy cannot. It can only be offered as a gift; and in fact it has been given to us in abundance. For this we are grateful. Just as Paul describes joy as a fruit of the Holy Spirit, so John in his Gospel closely links the Spirit to joy. The Holy Spirit gives us joy. And he is joy. Joy is the gift that sums up all the other gifts. It is the expression of happiness, of being in harmony with ourselves, which can only come from being in harmony with God and with his creation. It is part of the nature of joy to spread, to be shared. The Church's missionary spirit is nothing other than the drive to share the joy that has been given to us.* (Benedict XVI, address to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2008)

## **7. A manifestation of God's action in the hearts of young people**

John Paul II spoke with emotion of the joy of faith that is a sign of God's action in the hearts of young people:

*Throughout these memorable World Youth Gatherings, I have often been deeply touched by young peoples' joyous, spontaneous love for God and for the Church. They tell of suffering borne for the Gospel, of apparently unsurmountable obstacles that were overcome with God's help: they speak of their anguish before a world tormented by despair, cynicism and conflict. Each Meeting leaves me with an ever greater desire to praise God for revealing to young people the secrets of his Kingdom (Mt 11,25).* (John Paul II, letter on the occasion of a seminar on WYD, 8 May 1996).

## 8. The Emmaus experience (Lk 24)

Our first conclusion is that young people at WYD have the same experience as that spoken of by the disciples in Emmaus (Msgr Renato Boccardo):

- like the disciples who were walking along the road, young people leave their homes and come to WYD as pilgrims
- as Jesus taught the pilgrims with the Word of God, the various events in WYD form one great catechesis where the Word of God is at the centre and is communicated, witnessed, meditated and prayed.

*World Youth Day is composed of various activities that all together form one great catechesis, a proclamation of the path of conversion to Christ that starts out from the experiences and queries arising from the daily lives of the young people. The Word of God is the central point, catechetical reflection is the method, prayer is the sustenance, and communication and dialogue are the distinguishing style.* (John Paul II, letter on the occasion of a seminar on WYD, 8 May 1996).

- as the disciples recognised Jesus in the breaking of bread, young people can meet Christ at the various celebrations (liturgies, Masses, way of the cross, Eucharistic adoration)
- as the disciples returned to Jerusalem to witness to the living Christ to the Church that was gathered together and that confirmed them in their faith, WYD is a Church event in which young people are both confirmed in their faith and are witnesses to others.

## 9. Everything directed towards meeting Christ in the Church

Our second conclusion allows us to answer the question that was asked before: can we make place in WYD for signs of service to peace and justice, to the drive against social inequalities and world hunger, of service to ecology and interfaith dialogue? All of these domains are important missionary territory for the Church. They follow on from the mission of service to humankind that the Church has received, the service of unity and communion. In a word, these missions of the Church arise from God's love for humanity (cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*). This love has been given to us and we have received the divine command to live it out: "that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12).

In order for the younger generations to enter into this framework of charity and to be engaged with the world, WYD guides young people towards the source of charity, God, whose Mercy is made manifest in Christ in the heart of the Church. At WYD we must also avoid being dispersed in following several objectives, no matter how legitimate they may be. The basic objective is to lead young people towards a meeting with Christ. We are certain that this meeting will then guide them towards service for their brothers and sisters.

In this spirit, we must be careful to keep on course with the proposals for activities made during

WYD and during the preparatory days in the dioceses. In recent WYDs, care was taken to allow only whatever would prepare for a meeting with Christ and to refuse anything that might not be helpful for this purpose. In practice this referred to choices made regarding music, exhibitions, concerts, shows and animation during waiting periods.

During WYD and the preparatory days in the dioceses, there is a need to “take a breath”. Young people cannot be enclosed in a church praying all day! Can entertainment be offered with secular dancing and rock music? Can they go sight-seeing during the preparatory days in the dioceses?

The decision was made - and it has been regarded as justified and fruitful -, not to encourage entertainment and amusement that come from a secularised culture unless they embody, in one way or another, the search for Jesus Christ. This does not rule out rock concerts and traditional dances when they are explicitly directed towards Christ in the Church. In choosing activities, the question to ask regarding each one is: will this foster a relationship with the Saviour? Will it contribute to a discovery of the Church?

The criterion is therefore to think of things in a way coherent with Christian spiritual experience. In this way we have a great amount of freedom with this process.

## **B. THE FRUITS OF WYD**

### **10. Countless benefits : fellowship and vitality in the worldwide Church**

We know that the experience of meeting Jesus Christ at WYD produces much fruit. Benedict XVI tells us:

*I have always felt a very special joy at these encounters. I remember especially the Twentieth World Youth Day at which I was able to preside two years ago in Germany. Some of you gathered here today were also present! It is an emotional memory for me on account of the abundant fruits of the Lord's grace poured out upon those who were there. Among the many fruits which I could point to, there is little doubt that the first was the exemplary sense of fellowship that stood as a clear witness to the Church's perennial vitality throughout the world... (Meeting with the youth at the Municipal Stadium in Pacaembu, São Paulo, Brazil, 10 May 2007).*

### **11. WYD gives youth the opportunity to feel responsible for the Church**

Another benefit of WYD is that the Church allows youth to take responsibility

- Responsibility is given in the organisation of WYD, e.g. there were 25,000 volunteers for Rome 2000
- At WYD, the Church sends the young people out on mission. John Paul II emphasised this aspect:  
*With their enthusiasm and their exuberant energy, young people ask to be encouraged to become ‘active in evangelization and participants in the renewal of society’ (Cristifideles laici, 46). Young people - who represent the youthfulness of the Church that*

*is the ever young Bride of Christ (cf Eph 5,22-33) -, are not only evangelized in this way, but they also become evangelisers as they take the Gospel to their peers, even to those who are distant from the Church and have not yet heard the Good News (John Paul II, letter on the occasion of a seminar on WYD, 8 May 1996).*

## **12. A place with a special call for vocations**

One of the important aspects of this conferring of responsibility and sending forth on mission is the call to vocation. In this regard, Benedict XVI had this to say:

*However, I would like here to recall a special Meeting, my encounter with the seminarians, young men called to a more radical and personal following of Christ, Teacher and Pastor. I wanted a specific moment to be devoted to them, also to highlight the vocational dimension typical of World Youth Days. In the past 20 years, many vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life have been born precisely during World Youth Days, privileged occasions when the Holy Spirit makes his call forcefully heard.* (Benedict XVI on his return from Cologne, General Audience 24 August 2005).

## **13. A new beginning for youth pastoral ministry in the host country**

Another beneficial result of WYD is the depth of renewal of youth ministry in the host country. At WYD in Cologne, Benedict XVI spoke of this when addressing the bishops:

*The experience of these past 20 years has taught us that every World Youth Day is in a certain sense a new beginning for the pastoral care of young people in the country that hosts it. Preparing for the event mobilizes people and resources. We have seen it right here in Germany: how a true "mobilization" has pervaded the Country, prompting a surge of energy. Lastly, the celebration itself brings a gust of enthusiasm that must be sustained and, so to speak, rendered definitive. This enormous potential energy can further increase, spreading across the territory. I am thinking of the parishes, associations and movements. I am thinking of the priests, Religious, catechists and animators involved with young people* (Benedict XVI, WYD in Cologne, meeting with the German bishops, 21 August 2005).

## **C. THE IMPACT OF WYD ON THE PASTORAL WORK OF THE CHURCH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE**

### **14. A support for regular pastoral ministry with young people in the Church**

We see WYD as being a huge support for the Church's regular pastoral ministry with young people. I quote from John Paul II:

*World Youth Day is the Church's Day for youth and with youth. It does not claim to be an alternative to regular youth ministry which often requires great sacrifice and dedication. It is intended more to consolidate this work by offering new possibilities for engagement, objectives that can foster ever greater involvement and participation. While aiming to awaken more sustained enthusiasm in apostolic action among young people, the Church certainly does not wish to isolate them from the rest of the community, but rather to empower them to be responsible for an apostolate that will reach out to other age groups and social milieux in the context of the 'new evangelisation' (John Paul II, letter on the occasion of a seminar on WYD, 8 May 1996).*

## 15. WYD renews youth ministry

Our final conclusion is that we observe how WYD gives a multifaceted response to the current needs of young people, and that it has characteristic elements that have been present since the earliest WYDs or that have been fashioned by the Holy Spirit over the years. Some of the elements of WYD can illuminate regular youth ministry. Here we list some of them:

- A. the dimension of fellowship and communion through:
  - gatherings
  - the artistic dimension: music, theatre
- B. the ecclesial dimension through:
  - closeness to the bishops:
    - contact between young people and the ministry of the bishop
    - the bishop has to be involved in youth ministry
  - active involvement of priests
    - youth ministry requires priests who are trained and committed; the fact of being a young priest is an advantage because of a closer cultural connection with youth, but this in itself does not confer competence. Training is necessary.
  - the diversity of young people, the universality of the Church
- C. proclaiming Christ

- the core of our pastoral work is the proclamation of the kerygma

This proclamation is increasingly necessary because younger generations have not heard about the plan of salvation revealed by Christ. They know little about the vocation of the human person, of the Covenant, of the divine presence within us (grace), the words of the Covenant contained in the Commandments, sin and salvation in Christ.

When Benedict XVI spoke to the young people on his arrival in Sydney (Thursday 17 August, welcome ceremony at Barangaroo) he outlined for them the plan of salvation, very simply, beginning with his observations from the window of his plane.

Do we do this often enough?

- the proclamation of the kerygma is a catechesis centred on Christ

*The experience of Youth Days is an invitation to all of us, Bishops and pastoral workers, to constant reflection on our ministry among young people and our responsibility to present to them the whole truth about Christ and his Church. How can we not interpret their massive, willing and enthusiastic participation, as a constant demand to be*

*accompanied on the pilgrimage of faith, on the journey which they undertake in response to God's grace working in their hearts? They ask us to lead them to Christ, the only One who has words of eternal life (cf Jn 6,68) (John Paul II, letter on the occasion of a seminar on WYD, 8 May 1996).*

- testimonies
- the centrality of the Word of God

D. steps in faith

The proclamation of the kerygma, the core of our pastoral work, should be carried forward with activities centred on faith and sacraments where the grace of God is given in abundance

- Eucharistic and non-eucharistic celebrations, the sacrament of Reconciliation
- Way of the Cross
- Silent prayer and Eucharistic adoration

We know that young people long for these when they are right, that is, when they emanate from a true and suitable proclamation, and when they offer a true experience of God in Christ.

E. responsibility given to young people

F. diversity in approach and in the aspects mentioned above, and pastoral coherence regarding an encounter with Christ, are the strengths of WYD. This should be said also for everyday youth ministry.