

One Young Person's World Youth Day Story

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It is good to be here. It is good to have a conversation about World Youth Day and to share my experiences of World Youth Day.

I've been grateful for the opportunity to take the time to stop and reflect on my world Youth day journey as at the moment there is very little time to stop and reflect!!!

World youth day co-ordinators break into a sweat every time they drive past an RTA flashing sign which displays how many days left until WYD

I bring to this conversation some different experiences that have shaped my view on our topic. The first experience was of being a Pilgrim to WYD in Rome at the age of 20 in 2000, and then a small group leader in Toronto during 2002, a pilgrimage organizer in 2005 when I was working for the St Vincent de Paul Society and now a program organizer in 2008 . Unfortunately due to bad health, I was unable to attend world Youth day in Cologne so I also bring to this conversation the sting of being left behind. Over the last 8 years my reflections about the World Youth Day movement have changed and grown. Despite having had very powerful experiences of WYD as a pilgrim, over the years, tensions and struggles have emerged in my own understanding of the value and purpose of World Youth Day. The good news is that these struggles have not paralysed me into dismissing the World Youth Day movement but rather encouraged me to struggle to find a more authentic offering of Church to our young people. Tonight I hope to explore the History of the World Youth Day movement, share some of my personal stories as a pilgrim, name the tensions and struggles I have with World Youth Day as I have grown in faith. I also hope to break open the culture our young people are living in and how World Youth Day attempts to speak to them within that culture. Finally I hope to put forward a challenge to each of you and encourage you to ponder what might be your individual and collective response to World Youth Day in your local context.

So how did world Youth Day begin ? Well the world Youth Day website tells us that:

It was established by Pope John Paul II in 1986 as an annual event to reach out to the youth of the world. He was inspired by massive gatherings of young people in Rome celebrating the Youth Jubilee in 1984 and the United Nations International Year of Youth in 1985. He wanted to bring together young Catholics from around the globe to celebrate and learn about their faith on a more regular basis.

Interestingly, Pope John Paul II saw WYD as a way to reach out to the next generation of Catholics, to demonstrate confidence in them, to rejuvenate the Church and ensure that the core teachings of Christ are transmitted and lived.

Every two to three years, World Youth Day is taken to an international host city. The World Youth Days are a week long event of teachings, festivals and celebrations. The event concludes with a pilgrimage walk to the site of the overnight vigil. Mass is celebrated the following morning with the Pope and the hundreds of thousands of young people who have gathered to be with him.

Sounds pretty good doesn't it? But as true as all this may be somehow this description doesn't quite capture a pilgrim's experience of World Youth Day. I'm pretty sure I would not be alone in saying that any adequate description of World youth Day must include a lengthy and heart felt monologue about the trials and tribulations of the World Youth Day experience. This epic tale would have to feature the diehard "I'm a pilgrim not a tourist" Character and tell of their experiences of Chaos, queues, communal showers, joyful singing (although definitely not in that order!) random acts of kindness and a general sense of, dare I say it.... Christian love! The tale however would be incomplete without the teller of the tale expressing this story with a perplexed look that captures the enduring question for all World Youth Day pilgrims That question being "so what is this thing about again?"

My World Youth Day Story begins with mum bringing home a flyer from Mass....

I can honestly say I had no idea what World Youth Day was about before leaving for Rome and to be completely honest I didn't go to any amazing programs whilst I was there. What I did experience though, was a Church that was so much bigger than I had ever imagined. I had no idea what it was or what it all meant but somehow I was caught

up in the middle of it. Years Later, I am still making meaning out of some of the experiences.

Perhaps the very first place to begin my World Youth Day experience is to tell the story of my first night as a pilgrim ...

Our pilgrim group traveling to Rome journeyed to the Holy land as part of an 8 day pilgrimage. We arrived into Tel Aviv airport to be met by our tour guide. It was late at night by the time we reached Bethlehem which was to be where we were spending our first night. We pulled up at the Bethlehem inn and unloaded the coach. We seemed to be waiting quite a while before our pilgrim group leader came out to us and said “ guys your not going to believe this but there is no room for us here” ... So here we were, our first night in Bethlehem and there was no room for us at the Inn! ... Turns out there was a mistake with our booking and we were staying at the Bethlehem hotel down the road!

This experience alerted me to what it was to journey into the unknown, the unexpected and to look for God in the experience. I came to see my life experiences could be placed in the context of the bigger Christian Story. Whilst I'd always had a strong sense of relationship with God, World Youth Day opened me up to the wider Church for the first time. One such memory is of the final Mass at Tor Vergata University campus. I vividly recall standing in a crowd of two million waving the Australian flag in the Italian summer sky singing Emmanuel- God is with us. I remember thinking; wow do I belong to this? What is this? What is this ceremony about? What do they believe? Actually, what do I believe?!

So my experience of Rome was completely new and I felt drawn to discover more. By the time Toronto Came around two years later I was a little more aware of what World Youth Day was all about. I think my experience of Toronto was the first time I encountered and became aware of the tensions in our own church.

One experience at the final Mass comes to mind...

I was a pilgrim to Toronto WYD having just finished university and keen for an overseas adventure before starting my first full time job.

I vividly recall the chaos and bedlam of bringing together 900 000 in one spot. Despite the mud, rain and constant queues I still recall the message of that day “you are the light of the world you are the salt of the earth” We had walked about 10 kms to get to the site of the final Mass. As we walked into the gates there were a number of young people handing out flyers at the entrance of the airfield. I took one and the contents of the flyer was pretty much anti church. It listed a number of damning statements about the Catholic Church naming it as corrupt and hypocritical. I read the flyer and thought about what it was saying. I remember wondering what I was supporting by going through those gates. I didn't want to be aligned with an institution that would lead me into blind submission- my experience at university had taught me that I was after a path that would encourage the freedom to think, engage and create. I ended up walking through the gates but as I walked I allowed the statements on the flyer to unsettle me, I didn't immediately dismiss them as false but faced the frailty of the churches weakness and my relationship with the Church. As with all relationships, there are times of anger, despair but also joy and great freedom.

Whilst attending WYD meant that I was becoming part of the wider Church body my experience of it actually allowed me deepen my individual sense of spirituality and relationship with God in a way that seemed so far from rules and tradition. My peers who were handing out flyers to the entrance of that airfield may have made all sorts of assumptions about why I was walking through those gates, On reflection I have discovered though that the motivation for walking through the gates was to deepen a relationship with God, others and myself- to come to some understanding about how to live my life in a meaningful way. Once I had walked inside I discovered that what I found there encouraged and allowed space for me dream to think , engage and create. Whilst not wanting to romanticize WYD I look back on it and acknowledge the whole experience left me energised and inspired, not blinded or restricted.

John Paul 2 gave the homily that day and I remember his words inspired me with possibility. He was a powerful presence as he seemed to be hardly able to move or speak yet he was using all the life that was left in him to convey a message of hope. At face value one could see a slurring, broken and frail old man who was very painfully, living out the last years of his life. However at the heart level I heard a man who was

desperate for me to cling to hope and love despite what the world or my own mind might tell me. He was desperate for me to hear a message of light and promise.

He said to us:

“You are young, and the Pope is old, 82 or 83 years of life is not the same as 22 or 23. But the Pope still fully identifies with your hopes and aspirations. Although I have lived through much darkness. I have seen enough evidence to be unshakably convinced that no difficulty, no fear is so great that it can completely suffocate *the hope that springs eternal in the hearts of the young*. You are our hope

Do not let that hope die! Stake your lives on it! *We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures*; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son”

With these words I was presented with a choice. To allow the words of the flyer to influence and motivate how I live my life or to believe and listen to the words of the Gospel and the sometimes broken and frail Church which proclaims them.

The WYD's were peak experiences in my faith journey that have managed to trickle down into my daily life and alter the way in which I live and see the world. I didn't get involved in the parish that directly sponsored me but I did continue to nurture my spirituality. World Youth Day offered me a community of friends who shared similar values and this gave me courage explore my faith further. My World Youth Day experiences were not the sum and total expression of my faith but signposts along the way- drawing me to get more deeply involved.

But it is not easy for young adults to say yes to the world youth day experience. We need to recognize that the gap to jump into involvement is for some quite wide.

I recall one encounter with my cricket buddies whilst at university. We were at the pub and I was trying to explain why I was going overseas to Rome. I bumbled around a few words- such as Pope, World youth day, sort of conference thing, Spirituality sorta celebration, not really a contikki tour more a gathering thing! At the end of my eloquent spiel one my team mates asked me rather bluntly- “you religious Rocket?” (Rocket

happened too be my nickname at the time) It was a difficult question to answer as I was faced with the dilemma of how my personal relationship with God and Jesus would be perceived and judged when slotted into the framework of a religion. This is a reality that young people face today. They struggle for language to express their spirituality and the role that the institutional church has in forming their life choices. For some of them it has no role at all in informing their social, moral or political decision making. Sr Joan Chissteser speaks of the world we live in and the context for young adults. She says

“Even spirituality and religion have become distinct entities as people continue to cling to one tradition but find themselves beginning to nourish it with the insights and comforts of many. Members of generation X, the first generation of humankind brought up in a world of more religious pluralism than ethnic identity, grow up in one tradition but move effortlessly from one to another. The social propositions, the physical invariables, the religious dogmas upon which life was once thought to be unalterably grounded have gone to silt” Joan Chitteser

So this is the landscape we live in. No absolutes but shifting sand. How does world youth day- an expression of church and outreach to young people take into consideration this territory?

That is the question!

Now I am no longer a pilgrim , I have a responsibility to look at the shadow and the light of World Youth Day as we prepare programs for young people. There is plenty of talk about the negatives of World Youth Day and I think it is important to openly and transparently dialogue about the shortcomings of world Youth day.

Paul Collins in his recent book titled Believers speaks about His concerns of WYD. He writes...

“How ever WYD will do little to confront the real issues facing the Australian Church , nor will it bring the kinds of change needed to push local Catholicism in the direction of renewal. Fundamental change does not occur through spectacular events, but only through deep reflection, careful planning and a willingness to tackle deep seated problems.”

My experience has been that World Youth Day has brought me right to the edge of the real issues facing Australian Church.

I certainly agree with Paul Collins view that change does come through deep reflection and careful planning and my experience of the Spectacular World Youth Day event has lead me to that deep reflection about the need for change and the struggle of how to bring about that change with integrity.

What are some of the issues we need to face with World Youth Day?

If I can draw on me experience once more... I am a young catholic who has been part of and is still involved in the World Youth Day. Mysteriously along side my involvement with World Youth Day I recognize that I am also a young Catholic who desires to know how to authentically respond to the poverty and oppression in our world in light of the Gospels. This pull or perhaps better put, this invitation to be with those who are experiencing poverty and those who are marginalized has led me to wonder whether it is justifiable to spend so much money on the World Youth Day event. Many have struggled with the idea of sponsorship of a few versus investment in local community programs which benefit many. As a young woman who desires to offer my life in service of the gospel, I struggle with the clericalism of the Church and wonder whether supporting World Youth Day will postpone a new vision of leadership and service. A common criticism of the event is the lack of inclusion of others with different faiths. How do we include others of different faiths in a gathering that is so overtly Catholic where there at times feels like there is room for no one else.

I have a hunch that God is operating in these struggles because they are struggles which are drawing me to be open to others. To be inclusive rather than exclusive. I'm also aware I struggle because I care so much, probably too much! I grapple with how to best care for the young people's relationship with Jesus. I grapple with how to best form them to encounter the freedom and life Jesus is calling them to. I foolishly and in plain defiance of the gospel feel burdened by this. I strain to know how to call them into relationship with Jesus and the Church. I don't have the answers to these struggles, what I do have however is the reality that God and I have chosen for me be working with MAGiS08, an Ignatian Program for World Youth Day. This choice has determined how I spent most of my time and energy. It is my life's passion at the moment. I made this

choice knowing my reservations about World Youth Day and its pitfalls but I can honestly say I felt drawn to offer my gifts and talents to World Youth Day and I feel peaceful about this and I trust the traces of God in my experiences over the last 2 years. I don't make this decision alone but with others in community, all working on a shared Mission. I believe that God is with us in our choice, not abandoning us, not leading us to misguided blindness but creating with us a deeper love for the voiceless, a more authentic vision of Christian community, Creating a more loving attention to interfaith and ecumenical unity, Creating a humble acknowledgement of the disappearing certainties we held about God. Creating with us a World Youth Day experience that is forged on struggle and faith. I guess that is the truest and most authentic place I can speak from. It is difficult for me to argue with my experience of the one who gets in underneath my blocks, resistance and opinions and leads me to a space where I am still, silent and ready to follow. The place where the struggles fall away and all I want do is bow down to the beauty of what is. The place where any frustration seems bearable and we are given the strength to struggle with our own overwhelming inadequacy as well as the Church's inadequacy at capturing the beauty and reality of what we are given though and in Jesus. Is this the journey we hope to invite other young adults to? As was my experience, the young adults may not know how God will open them up to life through their World Youth Day experience but the invitation is to trust that He will.

These are my personal experiences but let's now turn to some of the wider influences on the Australian Young Adult...

The modern day Australian Young person lives in a world that promotes the instant fix, self gratification and individualism. These messages are skillfully and unashamedly promoted to young people. These values are loud... in fact down right noisy and in most cases are forming the values of our young adults. The life and culture of the world that young adults are living in leaves little space for reflection or the opportunity to listen to the deeper stirrings their own hearts. Why is there much noise and why are these messages so formative well in addition to the technological advancements which make it all the more easier to communicate messages, Australian Youth are hot property and a much sort after slice of the consumer market. They are inexperienced, impressionable and wealthy (compared to majority of young people around the world). They are technologically savvy so they are able receive messages across many communication

mediums. From ipods , to facebook, to chat rooms, to sms, to email (please not be alarmed if you didn't understand one world I said in that last sentence!) - young people live in a world where they are bombarded with information and messages. The question remains who is sending the message and if we have a message to send, how are we communicating it.

- Interviewing designers for the MAGiS logo. They knew who I was and they wanted to sell me their product... they managed to get into my shopping trolley!!!

Companies spend Millions of dollars getting to know young people. They research their likes, their dislikes, their culture, in an attempt to successfully convey their product or message. Is it any wonder with all that effort , energy and expense that multinational companies seems to be fairing a little better than the Church in the formation of young people. Is it absurd to suggest that Perhaps the hype of world Youth Day meets young people where they are at in a way that is familiar to them with a message that is unfamiliar to them. Jo Grainger a past pilgrim to World Youth day in 2000 articulates this sentiment during an interview for Radio national's encounter program. She says:

“The thing about youth in post- modern culture is that there are so many choices, and what I think John Paul II did very well was that he identified that young people want something on this big scale- they like the grandness, they like the audio- visual, they like the stimulation, the music , the culture...”

So is World Youth Day the catholic Churches advertising campaign to young people? Is it a campaign that promotes a message of love? Is it a bold proclamation of life, freedom and service in direct opposition to the messages of individualism, fear and self gratification I think it is an entry point into the Church but then the challenge is to bring the young adults to a personal relationship with Jesus so that the World Youth Day event is not about self gratification or selling the Catholic product but a genuine invitation to discover meaning for young peoples lives.

There is a need to provide an alternative to the messages of the world and the Church has something unique to offer in this. It captures the essence of what it is to be human through Jesus Christ.

So what does all this mean for you and your community? Well let me share my experience of MAGiS08

MAGiS08 is an example of a particular community responding to the world youth day initiative. This means that we are adding a different colour to World youth day. MAGiS will be different from the mainstream offering because the Ignatian community has a particular gift to offer the Church and the World. There are communities all around the place trying to respond with authenticity to this initiative- Green WYD, Christian Brothers, Josephites, Oblates, Days in the Dioceses. Now these are not in competition with each other but offering who they are without fuss in the hope it will meet the spiritual needs of young people who are hungering for more. This is a good thing because we are a diverse church and the needs are many.

The young people need each community in the church to offer their unique gift into the mix. None of us really fit into the good catholic box, we need to invite our young people onto a journey that says its ok to have arms and legs hanging out of the box!

When I think of your community here in Maitland/ Newcastle I ask myself, what are the particular needs your young people have? How can your diocese or community respond through with its unique giftedness? How can your 150 000 catholics and 45 parishes respond generously and with the hospitality of the Bethlehem Hotel rather than the Bethlehem inn?

As I have been involved in preparing a program for the Ignatian community for world youth day I am noticing within myself a discontent; a desire for more than my previous experiences of World Youth Day. I am noticing a desire to break free from the shackles of disbelief to put forward an expression of our faith that is reflective of many different life experiences in an Australian context. There is a call, a movement of the spirit that calls us interestingly enough, to those who are majority in our Church who struggle to see the relevance of relationship with Jesus in their lives today.

If we view this with Holy eyes and ask what is the message of revelation here? What is calling out to be named, molded, shaped and brought to life? Can we, dare I say it, claim the structures as our own and influence the outcome of World Youth Day? No one can

deny the energy that has been unleashed as a result of this initiative. I have a job because of that energy!

In July it is expected that 5000 pilgrims will come to this diocese to be part of the Days in the dioceses program and a further 120 000 young adults will come on pilgrimage from overseas to Sydney. Sydney as a place of pilgrimage not a contilkki tour but pilgrimage. I don't know about you but this leads me to ask what do we have to offer that will be of any value to a young persons relationship with Jesus because at the end of the day that is the heart of the matter. When you take away the bishops, the who ha, the traffic jams, bringing people to a personal relationship with Jesus is the more for world youth day that we are called to discover. We in our own context, what ever it is, whether it is the Ignatian community, the Lochinvar Sisters of St Joseph or the Maitland/ New castle Diocese, all need to be true to this call.

So I challenge you to get involved in whatever you can offer. Be open to the opportunity to allow this to transform. World Youth Day does present us with the opportunity for a punctuation mark in the history of our Church and Country. How can we help to ensure the punctuation mark accentuates Jesus?