

Reflection on WYD 2005

by Margareta Brosnan



The phenomenon of World Youth Day (WYD) has been a sign of hope for the Church ever since its inauguration in 1984 when Pope John Paul II invited young people to meet with him in Rome on Palm Sunday. The staggering number of people attending these events in the years since then has caught the attention of the secular media: in 1984, 300,000 young people accepted the Pope's invitation; in 1995 the Philippines WYD set the record for the largest crowd in human history: 4 million people. This was followed by 2 million in Rome in 2000, a more 'modest' 800,000 in Toronto in 2002 and 1 million in Cologne this year.

But are these gatherings are real representation of the world's catholic youth population? When looking at statistics the answer is clearly no with 79.2 % of this years participants coming from Europe and only 14% coming from the Americas where half of the world's catholic population come from. The limited participation of young people from Africa and Asia was also felt this year, with thousands of young people especially from Cameroon, Togo, and the Philippines being denied visas. Even though the Pontifical Council for Laity and the WYD organisers in Germany tried their best to ensure financial solidarity and visa processing. It is clear that the next WYD which will be held in Sydney, Australia, will be a much smaller gathering as visa processing will again be a huge challenge due to the current Australian governments tight boarder security and limited numbers will be able to afford to travel to the land down under.

In light of these factors one may question what the value of such gatherings is? Prior to this WYD as someone who had never experienced a WYD, but had participated in various other gatherings such as the World Social Forum, I too asked this question, yet now having experienced WYD I can see many values in the event. It provides young people with a space to express their faith, to exchange with other from other cultures and backgrounds about their understanding of faith and through this is allows young people to deepen their understanding of their faith and the communal aspect of our faith as Catholics. For many young people the simple act of being able to experience a new country and encounter people from all over the world is a rich spiritual experience that can even be life changing.

For me personally the WYD in Cologne was a memorable experience. The most memorable moments would have to be those times that I spent discussing and reflecting with people from other parts of the world about challenging questions we face in our lives and young Catholics. Sleeping with 200 members of our national movement KSJ-Germany at a school in Bonn. The gathering that we as the international teams of IMCS and IYCS organised was also a rich experience, hearing the student testimonies about how their faith has called them to action, meeting other YCS and IMCS members from all over the world and exchanging on the actions that we are involved in back in our national. The vigil at Marienfeld has also made an impression on me. I was amazed at how calm the enormous crowd was, praying together in the open field and all squashed like sardines in a tin can.



Even though I see the importance of WYD, I still feel that there are many elements which need deeper reflection and evaluation. How can we open this event to ensure that it really does represent the catholic youth population? How can we ensure that when these

young people return to their countries that they continue to live their faith with such passion and energy? In light of this I feel that our movement has a key role to play in such gatherings. It is essential that we continue to create spaces during WYD to encourage young people to questions their faith, to recognise that their faith calls them to respond to the injustices that exist in our world by following in the footsteps of Jesus and taking action to make a difference.

Finally as an Australian I look forward to welcoming young pilgrims to our great land down under, to celebrate their faith and discover the Australian spirituality. I encourage all past and present members of YCS in Australia to engage with the Church to ensure that it is a successful event and to lobby our government to ensure that young people from all over the world are able to attend.



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