

THE FULLNESS OF WYD08

by Daniel Giles

This year I was truly blessed with the opportunity to attend World Youth Day. It allowed me to catch up with old friends, make some new ones, enjoy the awesome music, and gain a greater understanding of the Church. I also learnt more about living by Christian values and had fun navigating around Sydney. But most importantly, it gave me what I have needed to reflect on my life so far and has been one of the biggest turning points in my life.

Prior to going to World Youth Day, I was struggling at times to understand where God wanted me. As I have made the move from Catholic College Bendigo (CCB) to a very secular uni environment I often felt disconnected from God and struggled to understand what he wanted me to do in my life. I also have Autism, which has made it difficult to embrace the pilgrimage of life I am on. I so often wanted my life to be a neat straight path and I would struggle with keeping my stress under control. I would particularly feel angry if I was placed in an unusual situation and sometimes I would be so shut off from the world around me that I wondered if I really had empathy for other people (one of the biggest issues I wonder about). God, however, had a plan for me to attend WYD, even though I questioned how I would go with the crowds in Sydney. Also I felt like I had gone very downhill since leaving CCB, where I would question whether God really existed and I felt like I was falling into my own mediocrity. I feared that I would also be forced to give up many of my own issues but I also felt WYD would be there for the better. I believed though that if God wanted me there, he would do everything he could help me to enjoy the most of it. He helped me to prepare physically and mentally (e.g. going on long walks and handling both crowds and public transport in Melbourne), socially (social skills are a struggle for people with Autism, like myself) and spirituality (e.g. Journey of the Cross and Icon, pre-WYD spiritual encounters, voluntary work prior to WYD and generally just encouraging me to explore the notion of pilgrimage and in small changes in my attitude to life).

There were many amazing highlights of my WYD experience. They include:

- Having the Germans visit Bendigo during Days in the Diocese. This allowed me to gain a sense WYD atmosphere and enjoy a cultural experience rarely seen in Bendigo.
- Catechesis and daily mass in a parish church. They were significant moments of learning and reflection for me.
- Catching public transport and handling the crowds in Sydney. It was at those times I discovered not only what I was really capable of, but also the notion of pilgrimage in general. I also found potentially uneventful occasions such as the long wait for food and the long drive to Sydney (with limited rest breaks) perfect opportunities to enjoy friendship and company and appreciate what God has given to us.
- The beautiful host family I had, who did everything for me and the other guys I was staying with. They gave me a different perspective of what God is to them.

- An afternoon at Bondi Beach. An opportunity to have fun. I actually rolled my jeans up and got wet jumping in the waves with fellow Bendigo pilgrims. The biggest highlight there though was just looking out to sea and the clouds above (a place where I really met God).
- The walk and sleepout at Randwick. Although part of the time there I felt spiritually connected, I admired how everyone was praying together. Also, when I reflect back now, I think of how God truly provided for us there.

Most importantly though, I felt I truly gained an understanding of who God was and that the experience opened me up to the beauty of life. I also found that it was time I surrendered my life to Jesus and make a pledge to go out and spread the good news.

It was not until I returned to Bendigo, however, that I could really reflect upon my WYD experience. I would have to admit that while I felt like a saint up in Sydney, I felt like I was treading water back home; a long way from the vibe of WYD. I went through a major withdrawal period where I wished I was in that exciting environment again. I was particularly disappointed and still am at the people who try to fill their voids with superficial things such as fashion and alcohol but I just try to be friends to them and lead by example. I also had a greater fear of Satan taking control of my life and really questioned whether my Graphic Design course was the right path. This led me to cursing God on several occasions. However, I came to understand that while it is so easy to be Christian in a religious-festival setting, a Christian life is more fulfilling when we go out to spread the Good News in everyday life. It was when I came to this realisation that I discovered the everlasting gifts I received from the Holy Spirit at WYD and that I was to put them to good use. I now see my life as a pilgrimage that could go in any direction and overall feel much happier about life as I avoid letting my worldly limitations weigh me down. I now feel that God has called me to do a special vocation: to spread hope (primarily by action) to people where they are at (especially in the secular world) and to be a strong disciple of Christ.

God, I truly thank you for the opportunity to go to WYD: I've learnt so much about You and life in general and I have been inspired to follow You. Also, I thank so many people for making WYD an enriching experience: my family, friends, community of Kennington Catholic Parish, the wider Catholic Community of Bendigo and the Sandhurst Diocese, fellow WYD pilgrims (both local and those from all corners of the world) and the wider global community.

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