

A Wonderful and a Wonderfully Catholic Church

The Catholic Review

The almost half million pilgrims who flocked to Sydney, Australia for the 23rd World Youth Day (WYD) made the sacrifices necessary ultimately because of their love for our Church. One participant stated it for most of us: "We have a wonderful Catholic Church."

Having experienced the unity of Catholic believers from some 170 countries of the world, all of us could chorus, "We have a wonderfully Catholic Church."

One of our parish youth leaders lamented the fact that more of her young adults were not able to be present to experience so deeply what it means to be Catholic. Such an experience, she said, would go a long way to break down the ethnic and racial divides among too many of our Catholics, young and old.

I made the pilgrimage to Sydney, in part, to show my support to Catholics and their bishops in the remote South Pacific. Australia is one of the most secularized nations in the world. It is estimated that barely 3 percent of Australians attend weekly religious services. The Catholic Church has been enduring this religious wasteland in Australia, all the while confronting a strong current of hostility.

Sad to say, I read more blatant, viciously anti-papal and anti-Catholic letters to the editor over several days in Sydney's dailies, than I might ever find in a year's devoted reading of our own secular press. Following the celebrations, a slightly more positive tone (though somewhat begrudgingly) was evident in some of the letters to the editor and the editorials. There was praise expressed for the young pilgrims and even for the Catholic Church. So much to the credit of Cardinal George Pell of Sydney for undertaking a three-year-long and uphill battle to celebrate our Faith and showcase the Catholic youth of the world.

Most especially, though, I made the pilgrimage to show my support of our Baltimore

contingent. In all, we had 75 pilgrims make the 24 hour journey to Sydney, a group of 30 from the Mount de Sales Academy and another 45 led by Mr. Mark Pacione and his fine team from the Division of Youth and Young Adult Ministry. (Gratefully, a number of these young people were able to participate in WYD from scholarships offered by generous donors.) More than a journey, they insisted it be a pilgrimage—described simply as leaving of the comforts of home to meet the demands of faith. One author puts it especially nicely: “A pilgrimage is a journey undertaken in the light of a story. A great event has happened; the pilgrim hears the reports and goes in search for the evidence, aspiring to be an eyewitness.”

I was so proud of our young 16 and 17 year-olds: their grasp of the spiritual nature of the pilgrimage they were embarked upon and their joy in recounting their experiences of prayer, their love and admiration of our Holy Father and their hopes of translating their deepened faith back into familiar home surroundings. How powerful a reminder that these young people are, as Pope John Paul II reminded us at WYD in Denver, not only the Church of the future but the Church of today. Pope Benedict said it well in his homily at the Mass inaugurating his papacy: “The Church is alive. The Church is young.”

I was pleased to share a few discussion sessions with our pilgrims and I expressed my hope and my confidence that the theme of this WYD, the “Power of the Holy Spirit” would enable them to become in our Holy Father’s words, “prophets of a ‘new age’ of love, respect for human life and reconcilers” on their return home. I look forward to finding ways to help them to share their energy and their excitement with the rest of our Archdiocese.

To that end, I pray that they (and all of us) might regularly call to mind the challenging questions which the Holy Father left them with at WYD’s closing Mass:

- “Are you building your lives on firm foundations, building something that will endure?”
- “Are you living your lives in a way that opens up space for the Spirit, in the midst of a world that wants to forget God, or even reject him in the name of freedom?”
- “How are you using the gifts you have been given, the power which the Holy

Spirit is even now prepared to release in you?”

- “What legacy will you leave to the young people yet to come?”
- “What difference will you make?”

I pray that these questions will enlighten and spark all of us to be aware of the powerful potential of the Holy Spirit in our own lives and in this world. This power alone can set our hearts on fire in our efforts to evangelize secular America, fulfilling the Holy Father’s repeated challenge while with us in April.

Finally, in speaking to an American archbishop of an archdiocese roughly the size of Baltimore, how surprised and impressed I was to learn he had 600 of his people participating in Sydney’s WYD. At the close of the final WYD Mass, Pope Benedict announced that the next WYD will be celebrated in Madrid, Spain, in 2011.

Why can’t we plan to have at least 600 youth make the Baltimore-to-Madrid WYD Pilgrimage? On second thought, let’s make it 1,000—this is Baltimore, after all! It would offer us all the unique experience of the wonderful and a wonderfully Catholic Church that is ours.

To see photos and read blog postings of Baltimore youths who made the pilgrimage to World Youth Day in Sydney, Australia, visit www.archbalt.org.