

Australia takes charge of World Youth Day cross, icon

SYDNEY, Australia – Australia has taken charge of the World Youth Day cross and Marian icon, symbols of the world's largest youth event which have traveled tens of thousands of miles around the world.

The cross and icon left Madagascar in February for Korea, where Australia's stewardship began and will continue until the end of World Youth Day Sydney in July 2008.

While on the Korean peninsula, the cross and icon were carried to the demilitarized zone separating North and South Korea. The zone is the most heavily armed border in the world.

Australian Father Chris Ryan, who will lead the cross and icon on a 12-month journey throughout Australia, went to the zone to pray with some 40 young Koreans.

"I went with the WYD cross and icon to the Freedom Bridge that 12,773 POWs (prisoners of war) used in the Korean War to return to the South in 1953," Father Ryan told Catholic News Service in an interview from Imjingak, near the zone. "We prayed for the reunification of North and South Korea. The bridge has become the symbol of reunification in Korea.

"The sight of the WYD cross with the Korean flag and razor wire behind it provided a stark backdrop for the simple prayer and rosary of the young pilgrims who had gathered there," he said.

The cross and icon will travel through 20 nations in Asia and Oceania before arriving in Australia in July. They will pilgrimage through 28 Australian dioceses before they arrives at the World Youth Day opening Mass July 15, 2008, in Sydney.

Auxiliary Bishop Anthony Fisher of Sydney, the chief organizer of World Youth Day 2008, said: "In places like East Timor, the dioceses have told us they don't just want to host the cross and icon – they need it to bring some light to their troubled times.

“The journey of the cross and icon is an invitation to the people of Asia and Oceania to join us in Sydney to celebrate World Youth Day with His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI,” he said. “We want the journey of the cross and icon to inspire young people from the region to make the pilgrimage to Sydney for World Youth Day.”

To celebrate the journey, World Youth Day organizers have commissioned up to 500,000 palm-sized wooden crosses. The small crosses, which will be distributed along the route of the pilgrimage, are being made by patients at the Catholic-run Mary MacKillop Outreach Center in western Sydney.

Making the mementos is part of the rehabilitation program for men recovering from debilitating strokes.

Sim Velasquez, who was paralyzed by a stroke two years ago has been making crosses. Mr. Velasquez’s wife said that since beginning the project, her husband had recovered movement in his left hand and felt “valued again.”

Mr. Velasquez’s wife said the project had given her renewed hope that her husband, a former financial controller, could make a full recovery from paralysis.

“The miracle is that Sim feels very useful and that has given me hope that I will see him grow more independent,” she said.