

Don't Extinguish This Fire

"Deep in our hearts we yearn for what is grand and beautiful in life. Do not let your desires and aspirations dissipate, but ground them in Jesus Christ. He himself is the sure foundation, the point of reference, for building up your life." These were among the words chosen by Pope Benedict XVI to welcome the more than 1 million Catholic teens and young adults to World Youth Day in Madrid three weeks ago.

Included among them was a sizable contingent from our own parishes and schools in the Archdiocese. I was grateful to be able to join them and to witness and to celebrate their infectious and indefatigable faith.

One such pilgrim was Aric Hilmoe, a member of St. Ann's in Hagerstown and an incoming freshman at Dayton University. Aric was kind enough to share some of his thoughts about World Youth Day, which was first begun in 1985 by Pope John Paul II as a youth-oriented celebration of the Catholic faith. Due to the economy, we were unable to send a larger group. I hope that Aric's account of the impact of this special pilgrimage will inspire the generous faithful of our Archdiocese to make this blessing a reality for the future of our Church.

This summer I had the privilege to attend World Youth Day in Madrid, Spain. The experiences I had on this trip are unforgettable ones. There were four activities or events that especially made an impact on my faith life. These were the catechesis sessions, the welcoming of the pope, the United States Mass, and the pilgrimage.

For three of the mornings of World Youth Day, youth that attended were encouraged to go to catechesis sessions. On Friday morning, my group attended a session led by Archbishop Timothy Dolan (of New York). One word he shared that I will always remember is joy. He reminded us that as Catholics we are supposed to be joyful while following Jesus' example. He also mentioned how the word joy reminds us of our priorities. Jesus first, others second, yourself last. J.O.Y.

Another experience that I will never forget is the Welcoming of the pope. My group lined up alongside one of the roads the pope would drive through. We arrived seven hours early and waited in the blazing sun and heat for his arrival. However, it was

all worth it, because when he finally did arrive, we were no more than eight feet away from him. It was breathtaking to see the Holy Father so close.

The United States Mass and the pilgrimage were two events that just showed me how incredible the Catholic faith is. That it is so great and wonderful that it could gather all these people from all around the world to just one city to all be witnesses to Catholicism.

Aric's account is not unlike that of many of our youth and young adults who attended World Youth Day. It is an eye-opening experience unlike any other for these young Catholics, who return "on fire" for their faith, seeking to keep it alive and to share it with others.

It is our great challenge - at the diocesan level, in our parishes and schools, and in our Catholic homes - to encourage and to help harness this faith-filled energy so they can satisfy their hunger to give of themselves and to deepen their relationship with Christ through His Church.

At the closing ceremony, the Pope challenged the Arics of World Youth Day: "Your friends will want to know how you have changed after being in this lovely city with the Pope and with hundreds of thousands of other young people from around the world. What are you going to tell them?"

"As you return home, take back with you the good news of Christ's love which we have experienced in these unforgettable days. Fix your eyes upon him, deepen your knowledge of the Gospel and bring forth abundant fruit!"

The Pope's message is relevant for each of us, regardless of age. Perhaps as we seek to strengthen the ministries we offer youth and young adults in our own parishes, we will heed the Pope's call and ourselves engage in an appropriate program or initiative that helps each of us live out this goal, the "New Evangelization"!

On Saturday, Oct. 15 at 4 p.m. at Mount de Sales Academy in Catonsville, Archbishop O'Brien will celebrate a reunion Mass for youth and young adults who attended World Youth Day.