

# YOUNG PILGRIMS

## *In Search of Treasure Ancient and New*

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THE RECENT beatification of the late Pope John Paul II provides an opportunity to once again reflect, not just on his own personal witness to the Gospel, but on the very nature and significance of his pontificate.

In light of his regular and extensive travels John Paul II was often described as the 'Pilgrim Pope'. He was acutely aware of the contemporary revival of the ancient practice of pilgrimage, especially amongst the young, and he saw it as a source of deep spiritual significance. At Santiago de Compostela (1989), which over the centuries has drawn countless thousands of Christian pilgrims along the El Camino Way, he implored young people to experience pilgrimage 'as a way to interior renewal, to a deepening of faith, a strengthening of the sense of communion and solidarity with your brothers and sisters and as a help in discovering your personal vocation.'

An initiative of the late Pope, World Youth Day is underpinned by the ancient practice of pilgrimage and since its very inception participants have been described as pilgrims. It has become the largest regular gathering of young people in the world. In pioneering the concept of World Youth Day, Pope John Paul II was extremely mindful of St Augustine's words, 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you' (Confessions, Chapter 1), and their particular relevance to young people. Despite a plethora of research to suggest that a growing number were abandoning 'institutional religion', rejecting the core principles and teachings of religious traditions and questioning the existence of God, he be-

lieved that they were in fact yearning for the transcendent and desiring a relationship with God.

In April 1984 over 300,000 young people descended upon Rome in response to an invitation from the Pope to come to the eternal city for a youth jubilee to mark the end of the Holy Year of Redemption. The magnitude of the response, and the euphoria and solidarity of the young people shocked both civil and religious authorities alike. The occasion was enormously satisfying for the pope, who had a longstanding trust in and conviction about the religious commitment and potential of young people. He remarked:

What a marvelous spectacle this assembly makes. Who says the youth of today have lost their sense of value? Well, I say that the experience of these days—a great and consoling experience of solidarity, fraternity and courage in the open profession of faith—is already in itself an answer to these questions and a negation of these doubts.

It was from the Youth Jubilee, aptly titled 'Festival of Hope', that the vision of World Youth Day was born. In a very real sense the birth of World Youth Day coincided with the birth of the 'new evangelisation', a concept which according to Rymarz (2010, p.24) was to become a *leit-motif* of John Paul II's pontificate. A year earlier the Pope had urged Church leaders to reconceptualise and renew their approaches to evangelization, believing that a commitment to renewal was vitally necessary, especially in light of changing social and cultural contexts and growing indifference to the Gospel message. In order to respond adequately to the emerging challenges and to be truly effective in her missionary

activity the Church required an evangelization which was to be ‘new in its ardour, its methods and its expression.’

John Paul II was acutely aware that a rejuvenation of faith and Christian identity within western societies like Australia was largely dependent upon the Church’s capacity to reach out to and actively engage young people in the life of the Church. His view was that they were especially vulnerable to becoming detached from the Gospel message, and becoming absorbed into a cultural milieu which was increasingly indifferent, and at times hostile, to Christian life and values. To this end he saw that renewed enthusiasm and innovation was required to attract and engage young people, and offset the prevailing culture. The World Youth Day phenomenon epitomizes the Church’s efforts for the ‘new evangelisation’. It is unprecedented and unparalleled as an approach to young people in its energy, innovation and dynamism.

Properly understood, the ‘new evangelization’ is Christocentric in nature and purpose. It seeks to enable an encounter with Christ and a deepening of relationship with him. The Church affirms that this experience of encounter can be the catalyst for a profound transformation, especially for those who have not closed themselves off totally from Christ (*Ecclesia in America* # 68).

While young people’s perception and image of God is extremely diverse and deeply personalized, the Church hopes that their experience of the transcendent at World Youth Day will be an encounter with Christ. Pope John Paul II (1996) defined that ‘the principal objective of World Youth Day is to focus the faith and life of every young person on the person of Jesus Christ so that Jesus may be their constant point of reference’. This Christocentric emphasis is reflected in the principal writings associated with World Youth Day, the themes that have been chosen, as well as the homilies and addresses given by both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI at the various international gatherings.



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While some of the international gatherings have been held in cities which are renowned places of pilgrimage (Santiago de Compostela 1989, Czestochowa 1991, Rome 2000) other World Youth Days have been conducted in modern cities with no obvious religious appeal (Denver 1993, Toronto 2002, Sydney 2008). Irrespective of it being a place of the sacred or the secular, hundreds of thousands of young people, and on occasions several million, have made the journey to unite as part of the universal Church at World Youth Day, which at its heart is a pilgrimage of faith.

Despite the great distances, young Australians have made the journey so as to be represented at every international World Youth Day. They have travelled as members of ecclesial groups and movements, with parishes and schools, and with family and friends. Others have made the journey alone. Compared to their European and North American counterparts the sacrifices of their pilgrimage are far greater, especially in regard to the cost and duration of their travel. It may well be that in overcoming the inconveniences associated with Australia’s ‘tyranny of distance’, and in meeting hardships along the way, a common bond and identity is forged between Australian pilgrims. These shared experiences perhaps help distinguish the young Australians as ‘pilgrims’ rather than ‘tourists’, and may well suggest that the true significance of World Youth Day lies beyond the key events of World Youth Day week, further reinforcing the well-worn adage that ‘the journey is as important as the destination’.

We are a pilgrim people of a Pilgrim Church and throughout the history of Christianity pilgrimage has developed as a religious and cultural phenomenon. Sites associated with the life of Christ and places with a tangible connection to saints, or renowned for apparitions, have become centres of spiritual significance and renewal. They include Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Rome, Santiago de Compostela, Lourdes, Fatima and Guadalupe. The custom and practice of pilgrimage, however, pre-dates the Christian story and extends beyond the practices of the Christian Tradition and the other Abrahamic Faiths. It has deep anthropological roots, going to the heart of our humanness and our relationship with God. The ‘longing’ identified by St Augustine is common to all people according to Gabriel Marcel (1945), who coined the term *homo viator* to describe our ever searching relationship with God.

Symbolic of the Christian life, ‘pilgrimage’ represents the deepest longings of the human heart. According to Br John of Taizé pilgrimage is ‘consonant with a thirst for communion with God and with each other’ (1984, p.388). Seemingly innate to human nature is the desire for connectedness and solidarity with others. Catholic anthropologist Victor Turner (1972) identified that satisfaction of this longing comes through the experience of *communitas*, as he termed it, which can emerge at large gatherings, especially those which are religious in nature or are underpinned by ritual. Such gatherings are inherently communal and collective and are characterized by high levels of enthusiasm, feelings of euphoria and the strong sensation of interpersonal connection between participants. This experience, and the new-found level of consciousness which accompanies it, is deeply satisfying, fulfilling an innermost human need, a melding of selves.

While diversifying as a phenomenon from its traditional religious roots, the practice of ‘pilgrimage’ is on the rise in contemporary society, especially as a means of expressing and forging national, cultural, social and reli-

gious identity. This is particularly true of young people who travel in unprecedented numbers to historic landmarks and places of national significance, especially the battlefields which have helped shape the national identity and psyche—Gallipoli, the Western Front and the Kokoda Trail. While not ostensibly religious these sites are very much considered to be sacred places by the young who journey there. They are able to connect with the past and appreciate the legacy to which they are heirs. Paradoxically, while contemporary society promotes a culture of unbridled individualism many young peoples’ search for identity and meaning comes from their being drawn into deeper relationship with others.

When visiting Anzac Cove many young Australians speak of ‘very special and emotional moments’, and their admiration for the heroism and sacrifice shown by soldiers as young as themselves. A clear sense of empathy is evoked from being present at the very site itself, a point attested to by a pilgrim this year in the Turkish newspaper, *Today’s Zaman*:

Coming to Gallipoli is a rite of passage ... because you witness what they actually felt, witness the actual conditions, such as the cold weather, and lie on the soil where soldiers have fought and died. ... [It] makes it a whole lot more special than attending dawn services back home.

While representing a physical journey, pilgrimage more profoundly represents an inner journey of change and growth, often spiritual. If properly travelled it enables a *metanoia* or conversion of heart, where attitudes and perceptions are changed and where life is viewed and lived differently. But do all pilgrims truly experience this *metanoia*, or even seek to? Antier suggests that while a highly motivated nucleus of people go to holy places seeking some special grace or conversion experience ‘the majority go on pilgrimages to discover something different, but more from outside than from within’ (1984, p.370).

In recent years several attempts have been made to categorise and describe the typical

group types drawn to World Youth Day and its associated pilgrimages (Allen, 2007; Rymarz, 2007 & 2008; Mason, Singleton & Webber, 2008). While many are deeply committed to their faith, fiercely loyal to the Holy Father and the Church's Tradition, others are motivated by a sense of spiritual renewal, desirous of a new-found grace. Others again are searching, impelled by curiosity, unsure as to what they will discover. As with all pilgrimages, both religious and secular, the journey to World Youth Day has no 'atypical pilgrim'. Rather, evidence suggests that there a number of distinct groupings, each in-turn motivated by an amalgam of factors.

One might hypothesise however that those who consciously make the decision to register as pilgrims for World Youth Day are proactively seeking an opportunity to experience the transcendent or further deepen their relationship with God. It is, according to Pope Benedict XVI, a time of deep spiritual renewal when 'young pilgrims are filled with the desire to pray, to be nourished by Word and Sacrament, to be transformed by the Holy Spirit' (2007).

Irrespective of one's particular view, the World Youth Day phenomenon has had a profound impact upon young Catholics, the way they see and express their faith, and the way in which they engage in the life of the Church. In the early years of World Youth Day this was especially true for young people from Europe and North America. With the passing of time and greater promotion locally, increasing numbers of young Australians have been drawn to the great international gathering.

The potential and significance of World Youth Day was highlighted in *Ecclesia in Oceania*:

In many places youth pilgrimages are a positive feature of the Christian life of young Catholics. Pilgrimage has long been part of the Christian life in conferring a sense of identity and belonging. The Synod Fathers recognized the importance of World Youth Day as an opportunity for young people to experience genuine communion. (#44)

The watershed moment for the 'local Church' came in July 2008 when Sydney hosted World Youth Day XXIII. With this came an unprecedented awareness of the event for all Australians, both young and old alike; and for all Catholics, for those actively committed to their faith, for those only occasionally involved with their parish community and even for those who disassociate themselves from all things seemingly religious.

In August this year hundreds of thousands of pilgrims will gather in Madrid, Spain to celebrate World Youth Day XXVI. Among them will be the largest ever contingent of Australian pilgrims, many still buoyed by the joyous enthusiasm and infectious spirit of Sydney's very own World Youth Day. Prior to July 2008 many Australians were oblivious to these great international Catholic gatherings, and at times, only a few 'diehard pilgrims' made the great trek to a distant host city. Today however there is unprecedented interest amongst young Australians, many eager to accept the Pope's invitation to join together with the youth of the world. It is anticipated that some four thousand will make the journey, which Pope John Paul II believed 'builds bridges of fellowship and hope between continents, peoples and cultures' (1996).

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In recent weeks I have interviewed a number of the pilgrims bound for Spain. It is apparent that their reasons for going are many and varied. Typically, the older pilgrims are more deeply committed to their faith and regularly attend Mass. Many belong to particular ecclesial groups and movements and actively lead or contribute to youth ministry within their local parish. Their commitment to World Youth Day is evidenced by their willingness to take leave from work or university and to take on part-time work to fund the journey. For many, this will not be their first pilgrimage to World Youth Day, a number making the journey each time since the great gathering in Paris (1997). In the interviews some cited particular memories of World Youth Day, including the oppres-

sive heat of Rome (2000), the sudden sunburst during the Final Mass in Toronto (2002) and welcoming the new 'Pope' in his homeland at Cologne (2005), however without fail they also recounted their pilgrimage, especially those who journeyed through the Holy Land. One pilgrim, obviously well-read, quoted Robert Louis Stevenson in reflecting on her journey through Galilee: 'there are times and places where the past becomes more vivid than the present, and the memory dominates the ear and the eye.'

A number of the older pilgrims also emphasized the critical importance of formation in preparation for World Youth Day and its associated pilgrimages, citing that 'one must have an open mind and open heart to get the most out of it and to fully appreciate where one is going.'

By contrast, the school-aged pilgrims are less connected with Church, but they are by no means disaffected or indifferent to the Gospel message. Their interviews were generally characterized by genuine enthusiasm for World Youth Day and a heightened sense of anticipation. Many looked forward to the opportunity of travelling to places they had only ever read about, especially with close friends and peers. Without exception, all of the school aged pilgrims affirmed their belief in God and many expressed the hope that their relationship with God would be strengthened by the

World Youth Day experience. Furthermore, their description of God was couched in 'Trinitarian' terms, and repeated reference was made to Jesus, the one to whom they prayed and modeled their lives on. In identifying World Youth Day events that they considered important, and which were of particular appeal and interest, the school-aged pilgrims named religious, as well as cultural and social occasions.

At a time when growing numbers of young people set out for World Youth Day an opportunity exists to help them see the true nature and purpose of pilgrimage, and to distinguish it from mere 'religious tourism'. While we are each naturally drawn to the unknown and to places of beauty, pilgrimages enable moments of encounter, like that experienced by the two disciples on their journey to Emmaus; 'Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road?' (Luke 24:32). Ultimately, it is this encounter that all pilgrims seek, as they respond to the deepest yearnings of the heart.

For the true pilgrim, their journey is a sign of their 'hungering for God', a hungering which Pope Benedict XVI reminded us of at the World Youth Day Vigil in Sydney, 2008:

There are times when we might be tempted to seek a certain fulfillment apart from God ... but where does this lead? ... God is with us in the reality of life, not the fantasy! It is embrace, not escape, we seek!

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*Evangelisation is the ultimate reason for which the Church proposes and encourages pilgrimages, such that they are transformed into an experience of deep and mature faith.*

—Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People 1998, n.2

*Stand at the crossroad and look, ask for the ancient paths. Ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.*

—Jeremiah 6:16

*Pilgrims are persons in motion—passing through territories not their own—seeking something we might call completion.*

—Richard Niebuhr