

# WYD-A SIGN IN OUR TIMES

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WHAT HAS BECOME known in the Catholic world as WYD—World Youth Day—was an initiative of St John Paul II that commenced in 1984. Since its inception, the world gathering of Catholic youth has been held every three years in cities across the First World mainly.

Ballpark numbers for participation in WYD tell a story of popularity: Rome 1984, 300,000; Madrid 2011, 2 million; Rio de Janeiro 2013, 3.7 million.

Of course, location and access impact significantly on crowds. Brazil in South America and the aura of newly elected Pope Francis no doubt contributed to the record gathering at Rio de Janeiro.

In the light of development over the decades, the question may well be asked: Is WYD an appropriate name for the event? Given that in more recent times a week of catechesis and liturgy precedes the actual day of the WYD Eucharist, and given that pilgrim groups commonly visit shrines and holy places *en route* to the main venue, perhaps a better name might be WCYE—World Catholic Youth Experience or the like?

Anyhow, a more serious consideration might be: What is the Holy Spirit saying to the church in this comparatively modern phenomenon? Not all share in the euphoria that sometimes accompanies the WYD experience. Some would dismiss it as akin to a Catholic rock festival with cultic overtones.

Clergy will testify that while significant numbers have gone to WYD over the years, evidence of increased weekly Mass attendance by youth of the parish remains minimal. Others may lament that the vast investment of energies and resources seems to generate comparatively little by way of

lasting effects.

So, in the face of these reservations, what is the Holy Spirit saying? Presumptuous as it may seem to proffer an answer, could it have something to do with the ways in which Catholic youth of our times prefer to demonstrate their religious orientation? Their faith may prompt them to come together for occasional liturgical celebrations and prayer forms; they will participate in Palm Sunday walks; they will generously participate in charity and social justice outreach initiatives; they may pray regularly; but, in general, they will not attend Mass each week in their parish church.

Can we broaden the umbrella of inclusiveness to create opportunities, beyond current institutional practices, where youth may be drawn together for faith and spiritual nourishment in ways that find resonance with what is best and deep within them? Perhaps we may need to extend such considerations beyond youth to baptised Catholics generally, especially to younger generations. Do we need to revisit our commonly held categorisation of Catholics as 'practising' and 'lapsed/nominal'?

In the words of Pope Francis, how do we build a church that is:

...capable of restoring citizenship to her many children who are journeying, as it were, in exodus.<sup>1</sup>

The 2011 National Church Life Survey gives the disturbing statistic that almost 95% of baptised Catholics in Australia between the ages 15 - 35 do not attend Sunday Mass regularly. Surely this calls for new paradigms in pastoral ministry to youth especially.

Given that, at its best, attendance at WYD helps young people to grow in personal faith

and in their identity as Catholics, may it be time to call for a reduction in the frequency of the international gatherings so that occasional mini-WYD's may be held at national or state level?

This is not the place to canvass all the implications of such a move. It is to propose however that a national forum where young Catholics who take their faith seriously might come together to further explore and celebrate their faith is worthy of consideration. This could be done in the context of a national Catholic youth festival of sacred and church music. True, such a gathering would lack the attraction of travel and international flavour but it would have the potential to be a defining step for many in a journey of Catholic faith and identity. With variations, such a model lends itself to trial at regional and diocesan



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levels, and could make provision for senior primary students.

A look at the scoreboard indicates that recent generations of Catholic youth have, in the main, disengaged from the institutional church. Are there some reasons within present church/school policies and practices that contribute to this scenario?

Our young pilgrims loved the spiritual parts of the week more than they did the touristy or pop music dimensions.

The silence after Holy Communion and the reverence it indicated was palpable.

Our young pilgrims are ready now for their mission.<sup>2</sup>

#### NOTES

1 Pope Francis in an address to the bishops of Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, WYD, August 2013.

2 Archbishop Anthony Fisher, <http://mediablog.catholic.org.au/?p=2212>

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*'Bringing the Gospel is bringing God's power to pluck up and break down evil and violence, to destroy and overthrow the barriers of selfishness, intolerance and hatred, so as to build a new world. Jesus Christ is counting on you! The Church is counting on you! The Pope is counting on you!'*

**—Pope Francis to the youth at Rio.**