

## **In the Heartland World Youth Day: A Defining Moment September 16, 2011**

The 62 pilgrims from the Diocese of Des Moines' group returned from Madrid, Spain and World Youth Day forever changed.

World Youth Day was begun by Pope John Paul II and is celebrated every two or three years in principal cities of the world. In 1993 it was held in the United States in Denver.

Some **one million five hundred thousand** pilgrims gathered with Pope Benedict XVI from August 17<sup>th</sup> to August 21<sup>st</sup> to mark World Youth Day. Participation in these numbers easily dwarfs attendance at other global events such as the Olympics and the World Soccer Cup.

World Youth Day is an event billed as a pilgrimage – which is a journey to a particular destination to engage in a religious experience with others. In this case, millions came together to strengthen faith and develop the courage to witness to this faith.

Our Des Moines' pilgrims soon discovered that their preparation was accurate. This journey was not a vacation. It was not a time exclusively for fun and games and entertainment. Rather, it was characterized by simple housing, adequate but ordinary food and being attentive to the needs and situation of fellow travelers. It called for patience, sacrifice and generosity. Surprisingly, in the end, such traveling produces a deep contentment.

What contributed to the change many of our pilgrims experienced?

The first stop of the Des Moines' group was in Cathares, a city located about three hours south of Madrid. Christianity was brought to Cathares in the 150-200 AD timeframe. This faith is deeply rooted. The city is constituted both of an ancient Roman-era sector and a contemporary part.

When the Des Moines' group arrived in Cathares we were greeted by representatives of a local parish. One, two or three of us were then taken to the homes of these complete strangers. We were showered with hospitality, attention, and a genuine warmth based on the commonality of the faith we shared. These few days touched each of us deeply and will eventuate in life-long memories and possibly, in some cases, friendships.

We then moved on to Madrid which had graciously surrendered its streets, transportation centers, parks, restaurants in large measure to the million and one half young people gathering for World Youth Day. Parading through the city were representatives from mainland China, Kuwait, Iraq, the Philippines, South Africa, Iceland. Indeed the Church is universal. Though separated by language, there was an overwhelming sense of unity anchored in the common faith in the Lord Jesus.

I reflected on the question attributed to Hitler in World War II. When questioned about the influence of the Pope, Hitler responded: “How many divisions does he have?” The same reality seems to penetrate our times. The world is stuffed with massive, enormously expensive weapons of destruction that are intended to provide “security” in the face of political and ideological divisions. But isn’t there far more security in the deeply committed young Christians who came from all these “so-called” divided and belligerent nations who possibly, left to their own devices, might be able to build the most authentic security of all as manifested by the friendship evident in Madrid?

The high point of World Youth Day occurs on the Saturday night Vigil and Sunday Mass with the Holy Father. In Madrid, the venue of this event was a former military airport. Literally, a million and a half people, predominantly young, gathered around the Pope for these two events.

During the vigil a storm brewed up. It had fierce winds, driving but warm rain and ominous lightning and thunder. It lasted a half-hour during which the entire Vigil came to a standstill. When the storm passed, the program resumed which then consisted mainly of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. A remarkable, stunning quiet gripped the gathering. The same deafening silence gripped the massive crowd at Mass the following day when the bread and wine were transformed into the body and blood of Jesus.

The secular press, ever skeptical of anything remotely religious, conceded that this was remarkable and could not have been staged. Quite simply, it was the manifestation of a million and one half people of all nations who identified the Eucharistic presence – the recognition of the Paschal Mystery, the death and rising of the Lord Jesus, which mystery we are invited into as we grow in God’s life and love.

Dispersing a million and a half guests to their homes across the globe is not an easy task and thus we found the trip home demanding and tiring. But as we arrived home, somewhat bedraggled and sleep-deprived each of us could feel that we had the benefit of a powerful, “awesome” experience. Our faith had been strengthened and surely its manifestation would be in the care, the love, the service, the justice which we would strive to witness to hereafter.

At the welcome ceremony at the International Airport of Madrid Barajas, Pope Benedict captured what eventuated to be the outcome for the young pilgrims.

“The discovery of the living God inspires young people and opens their eyes to the challenges of the world in which they live, with its possibilities and limitations. They see the prevailing superficiality, consumerism and hedonism, the widespread banalization of sexuality, the lack of solidarity, the corruption. They know that, without God, it would be hard to confront these challenges to be truly happy, and thus pouring out their enthusiasm in the attainment of an authentic life. But, with God beside them, they will possess light to walk by and reasons to hope, unrestrained before their highest ideals,

which will motivate their generous commitment to build a society where human dignity and true brotherhood are respected.”

The Diocese of Des Moines was most fortunate to benefit from the financial support of many which made it possible for most of the Des Moines seminarians as well as representatives of our minorities to be able to participate in the pilgrimage to World Youth Day, 2011. Heartfelt thanks are extended to these partners in faith.

The next World Youth Day will be in 2013 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where the remarkable legacy of Pope John Paul II will surely continue.