

### **Missionary Joy**

Children returning to school may be asked to give individual accounts of “what I did on my summer vacation.” I did not ride RAGBRAI in its golden jubilee year, but I remain inspired by what I witnessed in early August on pilgrimage to World Youth Day in Lisbon, Portugal, focusing on our own diocesan group of some 50 young adults along with another six not-so-young adults who accompanied them. Led by Justin White who oversees ministry to young adults as part of our diocesan Evangelization and Mission team, they composed a diverse group largely from St. Ambrose Cathedral Parish in Des Moines. They had fundraised for more than a year by performing various sorts of service so that they could participate in this exceptional spiritual event.

The catalyst for this convergence of 400,000 or so young people from around the world for the days leading up to the concluding Sunday Mass (where 1.5 million of the faithful stretched as far as the eye could see) was the invitation and presence of our Holy Father, Pope Francis. The 86 year-old pontiff became endearingly animated as he “stirred the pot” of this international soup of over 200 nationalities, diverse cultural flavors, rousing music and tongues of the Spirit manifested in heartfelt praise and worship. There were also countless catechetical sessions revolving around the “Rise Up” theme drawn from the Luke 1:39-56 passage detailing Mary’s haste after the Annunciation to visit her pregnant cousin Elizabeth.

Our Des Moines Diocese group was in its own right a microcosm of the Church Catholic; they revealed the universality of the Body of Christ in all its members, whose beautiful profiles included women and men from Eritrea, South Sudan, Myanmar/Burma, and Ghana, as well as

Polk and Taylor Counties. They arrived in Portugal earlier than many other groups in order to spend some days in the Diocese of Leiria-Fatima, where they quickly bonded with their host families. These families fed them, transcended language barriers in conversation, and facilitated multiple visits to the Shrine and village where Our Lady of Fatima made her dramatic appearances to Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco. In many cases, our pilgrims formed connections with their hosts that will last long after the tears shed upon their departure for Lisbon have dried.

In contrast to RAGBRAI, where a certain raucous exuberance prevails in what amounts to a rolling party winding across the Iowa prairie, the signature feature of World Youth Day is sheer, unadulterated joy: joy in the presence of the beloved Savior, Jesus Christ, in Eucharistic adoration and in the ‘City of Joy’ whose main venue was the field of forgiveness. There, rows and rows of priest confessors sheltered in makeshift confessional huts tendered God’s mercy to pilgrims for long stretches at a time.

An effervescent joy coursed through the streets as young people sang, chanted, and danced their way from one venue to another, encountering other young believers who reinforced the awareness that they are truly never alone when they live faith as disciples and witnesses to Christ. And yes, there was joy as they spontaneously serenaded in the pope’s presence, “¡Esta es la juventud del Papa!”/ “This is the youth of the Father!”—with the double entendre referring to both the Holy Father and the heavenly Father.

As Pope Francis vigorously emphasized to all of us, regardless of age, we are loved just as we are, “without makeup,” for to God “none of us is a number, but a face and a heart.” To be loved unconditionally prior to anything we do or merit is not an excuse for complacency or inertia, let alone an excuse to pursue life solely on our own terms, defining love in ways unfamiliar to the Gospel.

God's love embeds a call to share in the mission of infusing joy in a world where dejection and apathy are far too prevalent. Joy is missionary; it cannot be kept to oneself, but is to be shared with others. For this mission we must trust in Jesus and his infinite mercy, and embrace an equally vital truth: **Jesus trusts us**; he trusts young people to be the ambassadors of hope and transformation that our world so urgently needs, human faces who convey to others that in the Church, "there is room for everyone."

For as the Holy Father cautions, there are plenty of folks who know our name, who collect data processed by algorithms, and then blend and bleach out our uniqueness as they mine knowledge but do not enfold it in personal, enduring love. They play songs that promise happiness but are quick to discard us when they have capitalized on our yearnings to do something meaningful with our lives. Pope Francis likens these illusions fabricated within a virtual world to "soap bubbles" that inevitably burst and leave us empty inside. Surely, the struggles and suffering of young people represented at Lisbon by the creative rendering of the Stations of the Cross revealed the sense of a void within that may be caused by estrangement from God and their peers.

Our next-to-last day in Lisbon, I was the main celebrant at Mass with our Des Moines group at the splendid St. Nicholas Church, along with concelebrants Frs. Raphael Assamah, James Downey, Paul Lippstock (of the Dubuque Archdiocese), assisted by Deacon Francis Chan. In my homily, I encouraged participants to take stock and give thanks for the ways in which God keeps his promises. I hoped they would etch in their hearts possible movements of the Spirit where God was prompting them to "rise up," to offer themselves to God in both familiar and unprecedented ways. And as they flow forward with these holy desires, I prayed they would

believe that despite our limitations and stumblings, God promises to always help us keep our promises.

Unlike RAGBRAI, where cyclists dip their tires in the Mississippi River and then scatter in various directions, the charge from Christ and his Vicar the pope to the young women and men who received the graces of World Youth Day is to abide in the connections they formed and then broaden the circle of communion among people of all ages in their home dioceses. While some of the fervor and euphoria of the time together in Lisbon may wane, young people will serve their communities and culture if they do two things among others: (1) Ask questions. As Pope Francis counseled “Don’t stop asking questions. . . because asking questions is a sign of restlessness, and *restlessness* is the best remedy for mere *routine*,” which dulls the soul. While it will require patience to allow some of these questions to be answered, the God of surprises will not forsake or forget us.

(2) Serve others, particularly those who are weary, weak, or needy in any way, by offering the precious gift of attentive presence and joyful solidarity. To hasten and listen to another is to effectively wipe the tears and the sweat from his or her brow, as Veronica did with Jesus on his passion pilgrimage to his Father. One of the most vivid images that struck me in Lisbon was the joy of the troupe of young adult performers who enacted the Stations of the Cross. They offered new insight into this Sixth Station as they radiated joy in the face of suffering, bearing the image of the Savior who is both source and fulfillment of our seeking.

May our Diocese of Des Moines World Youth Day pilgrims continue to be missionaries and catalysts of joy for all of us here on the home fields of faith in which God’s beloved children converge as a new school year and love and hope continue to mature!