

WYD: a festival of youthful faith...

All those present at WYD 2008 in Sydney will surely remember the outburst of joy at the end of the ceremony when Pope Benedict XVI announced that the next meeting of young people with the Successor of Peter would be in Madrid. At that time, it seemed that 16-21 August 2011 was very far away in the future. Now we have almost arrived at this great event so awaited by young people. There has been intense work in the field of youth pastoral ministry all over the world for the past few years. WYD has become part of life for the universal Church, and it is an ongoing stimulus to the Church's commitment to the younger generations.

This time it is the turn of the Church in Spain to be called in a special way. All the Spanish dioceses – beginning with the Church in Madrid – have responded wholeheartedly and enthusiastically to the Holy Father's decision. The period of WYD preparation has been a special *kairos* in which the Spanish Church has, in a certain sense, rediscovered itself and its great spiritual resources. These have often been hidden and invisible to the eyes of a distracted observer. The Spanish Church has been able to appreciate the precious resources to be found in young people, in the pastors, and in all those who have given witness wherever they are. This has sometimes been quite surprising, showing real commitment and immense generosity.

The reasons why the Spanish capital was chosen to host the next WYD are given by the Holy Father in his message for WYD 2011: "Now, at a time when Europe greatly needs to rediscover its Christian roots, our meeting will take place in Madrid with the theme: 'Planted and built up in Jesus Christ, firm in the faith' (cf. Col 2:7). I encourage you to take part in this event, which is so important for the Church in Europe and for the universal Church. I would like all young people – those who share our faith in Jesus Christ, but also those who are wavering or uncertain, or who do not believe in him – to share this experience, which can prove decisive for their lives. It is an experience of the Lord Jesus, risen and alive, and of his love for each of us" (Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the twenty-sixth World Youth Day 2011). Here the Pope is confirming the basic aim of each WYD: evangelisation in which young people are the prime movers. It is important to remember this as we get ready to leave for Madrid. This insistence on the importance of faith certainly does not mean that the Church is indifferent to the serious problems being faced by young people today. Quite the contrary! The Holy Father clearly says: "only those who recognize God know reality and are able to respond to it adequately and in a truly human manner. The truth of this thesis becomes evident in the face of the collapse of all the systems that marginalise God. [...] If we do not know God in and with Christ, all of reality is transformed into an indecipherable enigma; there is no way, and without a way, there is neither life nor truth" (Inaugural Session of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, address

by Pope Benedict XVI, Aparecida, 13 May 2007). The Church teaches us to look at things more deeply and never to lose sight of what is most important.

Every WYD is a wonderful experience of the Church as a friend of youth that shares in their problems, a Church at the service of the younger generations. It is an experience of the universal Church – an experience unlike any other – that embraces the whole planet, and of a young Church that is full of enthusiasm and missionary fervour. It is an epiphany of Christian faith with truly planetary dimensions. Young people – especially those in the old continent of Europe which is extremely secularised – are in particular need of all of this.

This is the second time that Spain so generously hosts WYD. How can we not remember WYD in Santiago de Compostela back in 1989. On that occasion, John Paul II was welcomed by the then-Archbishop of Santiago, Archbishop Antonio Maria Rouco Varela. Now, as Cardinal Archbishop of Madrid, he will welcome Benedict XVI. It was in Santiago de Compostela that World Youth Day took on its present structure: three days of catechesis, the prayer vigil on Saturday and the Mass with the missionary sending forth of young people to conclude the event. It was also at Santiago that there was a discovery of the pilgrimage dimension as an essential element of young people's journey in the footsteps of the Successor of Peter. Over the years, each WYD has added something new to the programme. Denver in 1993 added the Way of the Cross. Paris in 1997 introduced the Days in the Dioceses and the Youth Festival (a programme of cultural activities). Rome in 2000 introduced the "Festival of Forgiveness" (300 confessionals were busy with young people at the Circo Massimo). In Toronto in 2002 there was a "Vocations Fair". Then in Cologne in 2005 there was Eucharistic adoration. We can see that the programme offered to the pilgrims is not static. It is in constant evolution as it tries to respond better to the real spiritual needs of young people today.

WYD in Madrid promises to be a particularly significant event. This can also be seen in the figures. At present there are 400,000 young people formally registered (a number never before reached so soon as young people tend to register at the last moment!); 14,000 priests coming with the young people; 744 bishops of whom 263 are bishop-catechists; 250 venues for catechesis that will be given in 30 languages (a true Pentecost!); 700,000 copies of YOUCAT will be distributed to young people in 6 languages; 24,000 volunteers from different countries will be busy in different services; and finally, before arriving in Madrid, the youth will have a stopover in one of 68 Spanish dioceses, confirmation that the whole Church in Spain is involved in the WYD experience! I hasten to point out, however, that we do not forget about the young people who will not be present in Madrid. Several countries are planning to have youth gatherings at the same time, and they will be linked up by worldwide television or internet (for example: in Ukraine, Burundi, Madagascar, etc.).

The presence of the Holy Father is a central factor of each WYD. The Pope will arrive in Madrid on Thursday on 18 August and at 7:30 p.m. there will be a welcome ceremony with the young people in Plaza de Cibeles. On Friday 19 August in the morning there is a planned encounter with young religious and young university lecturers in El Escorial. That same day there will be the traditional lunch with some representatives of the young people and the Pope. Towards the end of the day, the Pope will attend the young people's Way of the Cross in the streets of Madrid. On Saturday 20 August in the morning, the Pope will visit the reconciliation centre and will hear the confessions of a few young people. Then he will preside at Mass for seminarians in Madrid Cathedral. At 8:30 p.m. the prayer vigil with young people will take place at Cuatro Vientos airport. On Sunday 21 August at 10:00 a.m., a solemn Eucharistic celebration will conclude WYD 2011.

The Madrid WYD looks to the sign of the recent beatification of John Paul II, the founder of WYD. In this way, Pope Wojtyla returns among the young people whom he so loved and by whom he was loved. Now he returns as Blessed Patron and Protector. The Mass to welcome the young people presided by Cardinal Antonio Maria Rouco Varela, archbishop of Madrid, on Tuesday 16 August in Plaza de Cibeles, will be dedicated to Blessed John Paul II.

Each WYD is a time of evangelical planting. It is a gift to be accepted with gratitude and with a great sense of responsibility. Let us therefore entrust our intercessions to the Patron Saints of WYD, and in a special way to Blessed John Paul II, that our planting may bear much fruit in the lives of so many young people today.