



Witnessing Our Faith : TCDSB Principal Experiences at WYD Madrid 2011

Many have asked me why I would choose to spend two weeks of my summer break with teenagers especially since I am the principal of a large Catholic secondary school. My answer is always a resounding “why not?”

I was privileged to travel with the St. John the Evangelist youth group to Madrid World Youth Day 2011. This was my third pilgrimage with a group of young people from my parish, previously attending WYD Cologne 2005 and WYD Sydney 2008. The pilgrimage experience continues to reaffirm my own faith and mission as a Catholic educator. It is hard to describe the exhilaration I feel when I am amongst 2 million youth from all over the world who have come together to celebrate our faith through prayer, song and dance.

We began our WYD pilgrimage by spending four days in Rome. One of the highlights was a day that started very early at St Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican. Here a chapel had been reserved for us beneath the Vatican near St Peter’s tomb so we could gather and celebrate Mass as a group with our pastor Fr. Michael McGourty. After Mass we visited the tomb of Blessed John Paul II who initiated World Youth Day.

From Rome we travelled on to Spain. We started our time in Spain by visiting Avila, the birth place of St. Theresa of Avila. We then travelled to Toledo visiting the Cathedral of Spain’s Primate and celebrated Mass with the Archbishop of Toledo. Once in Madrid, young pilgrims from around the world flooded into the city for the beginning of WYD. For three mornings we gathered in a sports arena with 12,000 other English speaking pilgrims for catechesis and Mass. We then spent many an hour

waiting in the hot sun on the papal route to catch a glimpse of the Pope. We were so thrilled to be only a few feet away from Pope Benedict XVI as he passed through the streets. Even though the pilgrims were hot and tired, the crowds were cheering "Viva la papa". I watched the faces of our youth and I could see how this experience was truly inspirational for them.

The highlight of WYD was the vigil held on an old airfield outside Madrid. Half of our group walked the 12Km and the rest took transit. We arrived on the field by noon and the heat was 47 degrees Celsius! We set up our sleeping bags on our assigned area of the field and then we spent the rest of the day trying to stay hydrated with our hats on and skin slathered in sunscreen. Finally the sun set and the Pope arrived but so too did the rain and high winds. Despite the weather the vigil was beautiful. The field was packed that night as 1.5 million soaking wet pilgrims tried to sleep. In spite of the uncomfortable conditions the morning sun ushered in another day and we were all excited when the Pope arrived to celebrate Sunday Mass. Pope Benedict XVI is truly connected to our youth. Below are the words of the Holy Father at the beginning of the Eucharistic Celebration at Cuatro Vientos Air Base, Madrid. Sunday 21 August 2011.

Dear Young Friends:

I have been thinking a lot about you during this time in which we have been separated. I hope you have been able to get some sleep in spite of the weather. I am sure that since dawn you have raised up your eyes more than once, and not only your eyes but above all your hearts, turning this occasion into prayer. God turns all things into good. With confidence and trusting in the Lord who never abandons us, let us begin our Eucharistic celebration, full of enthusiasm and strong in faith.

It saddened me when I read the headline in the August 28th Catholic Register- *Quarter Million denied entry to papal Mass.*

This was an experience that should not have been missed!!!!

Joan Tschernow, Principal at Blessed Cardinal Newman Catholic High School