



A local Pastor's Reflection and Transformation from World Youth Day in Madrid

World Youth Day in Madrid was a first for me. Although I have been a priest for almost twenty years, I was never really in a position where attending World Youth Day was an option for me. Much of this had to do with my being assigned to parishes where the pastor was not enthusiastic about World Youth Day, or the fact that for many years I was teaching in our diocesan seminary. That all changed for me when I was named pastor of St. John the Evangelist Parish in Weston. Shortly after I arrived at the St. John's in Weston, I met with the parish's two very committed and very enthusiastic youth leaders, Connie Pereira and Joan Tschernow. They convinced me that my attending World Youth Day would be of great benefit to the young people we minister to at St. John's. No matter what excuse I attempted to present for not attending, they had a love for the young people in our parish that was stronger than my excuses. I realized that I could not ask them to lead this group if I was not willing to go with them and support their efforts. It turned out to be one of the most enjoyable trips of my life and the greatest experience of pilgrimage that I have ever had.

World Youth day in Madrid was pure chaos in an inferno of a heat wave. In the midst of this, our group managed to form a little community of pilgrims who were always watching out for one another and concerned to help one another through the difficulties of each day. Despite the challenges in Madrid, it always felt as though God was guiding us through the difficulties and walking with our little group of twenty pilgrims. For me it was a real testimony that God is with us not just when things go well, but that often God is most with us when things are difficult and going wrong. What made this experience so great for me was that the young people in our group knew that God was with us also. No matter how difficult the conditions of our trip got or how uncomfortable our sleeping arrangements were, I would look around and see the members of our group reading their Bible, excited to meet other Christians from around the world, or just enjoying the company of others in the group. They had come thousands of miles to spend time with God and millions of other Christians; and they were happy that they had.

On what was definitely the worst night of our trip, the night of the Vigil, I can remembering the great feeling of joy that I had as I was kept awake by people kicking me in the head as they walked over me as I tried to sleep in a field in the middle of nowhere. Our entire group was soaking wet, the heat of the day had turned into a freezing chill and we were all very cold. It was four in the morning and two from our group had just gone to get water so the others would not get dehydrated the next day when the heat returned. It was a terribly uncomfortable night and I was certain that God was with us in our group and in that field. What made the feeling so incredibly strange was that I was absolutely certain that every other person in that field that night was as certain of God's presence with us as I was. It was that common certainty of God's presence at that vigil on that cold rainy night which made the experience of

World Youth Day so powerful for me and which I know sent more than a million other people home equally certain of God's love for them.

My hope is that all of the young people who experienced God's love for them on that difficult and uncomfortable cold and wet night in Madrid will remember that certainty of God's love for them throughout their pilgrimage in life. World Youth day is intended to help each person who attends realize that the greatest pilgrimage that we are asked to take is that through life to heaven. By experiencing God's presence with them on a shorter pilgrimage, the pilgrims to World Youth Day are to know that God is with them on that longer and more important journey to heaven. I know that I certainly sensed God's presence in and with our little group in Madrid. I hope the others who travelled with the group did as well. It was an experience I will not forget. I am ever more enriched from this experience with my pilgrims, and therefore look at the youth of my parish with more focused eyes.

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