

Today in Krakow, Pope Francis celebrates a solemn open-air Mass at the close of the 13<sup>th</sup> International World Youth Day, the brainchild of Saint John Paul II. At the 2002 edition in Toronto, the Pope of the day shared his vision for the events: “I imagined *a powerful moment* in which the young people of the world could meet Christ, who is eternally young, and could learn from him how to be *bearers of the Gospel to other young people.*”

The Catholic Church has held the large gatherings every two or three years since 1987. I have attended six of these—in Paris, Rome, Toronto, Cologne, Sydney, and Madrid.

They are joyful and uplifting experiences for young people between 18 and 35. They are equally invigorating for the bishops, priests, religious, and laity who accompany them.

In years when there is not an international gathering, local churches celebrate World Youth Day on the weekend of Palm Sunday. This gives adolescents and their families a chance to take part and to plan for the next big gathering.

As the World Youth Day has developed, other traditions arose such as the “Days in the Diocese,” when local churches welcome delegations heading to the main event to share the joy of the host city.

In Halifax in 2002, we welcomed several groups en route to Toronto. In St. Mary’s Cathedral at a Mass hosting our visitors, Cape Town Archbishop Lawrence Henry, who accompanied a racially diverse group of South Africans, electrified the congregation with candid remarks about the struggles he went through on his journey to get full acceptance as a citizen of his own country.

Another key dimension to World Youth Day is the exploration of ways to express and share one's faith. An Ottawa-based Catholic movement to evangelize students on university campuses across Canada is playing a significant role in Krakow this week.

Catholic Christian Outreach, better known by their acronym "CCO," has developed a simple booklet to invite young people to put God at the centre of their life. Called "The Ultimate Relationship" (UR), the 12-page booklet outlines the biblical message and invites a personal commitment to God's plan for meaning and happiness.

The booklet, designed to be presented to another person in a one-on-one dialogue, has been translated into a dozen languages. These languages include the major European ones as well as Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian. Canada's contribution to World Youth Day 2016 was the printing of one million copies of UR and the training of young people to share their faith with others.

Although there is a tourist dimension to the WYD travels, trip leaders instil in the participants a sense that they are "pilgrims." A pilgrim sees the unexpected setbacks and frustrations of travel in a bigger, spiritual perspective. In the Days in the Diocese, they practice the local language, make friends, take part in catechetical sessions given by bishops, and enjoy hikes, prayers and Eucharistic celebrations. Finally, the young people revel in the encounter—even at a distance—with the Holy Father, this year Pope Francis.

One unexpected but welcome side effect of World Youth Days is that many attendees discover their vocations to religious or married life there!

All participating youth laugh and cry, sing and dance, grow frustrated and weary, and become friends with other Catholics. Most importantly, they discover they are not alone in their love for their faith and desire to practice it openly and joyfully. In short, they discover what it is to be little pilgrims on the bigger pilgrimage of a life lived to the fullest.

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