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The “genesis” of World Youth Day

In Greek, the word *genesis* means the beginnings or the origin, and in the context of World Youth Days, it indicates their original idea. The idea initiated in the heart of the Holy Father John Paul II and since then it has borne incredible fruit in the life of the contemporary Church. The Kraków event will be the 31st youth meeting, counting from 1985 when John Paul II announced the very thought of organizing youth days on a global scale. John Paul II led as many as seventeen World Youth Days (WYDs), from Rome to Toronto; Pope Benedict XVI participated in WYDs in Cologne, Sydney and Madrid, whereas Pope Francis – in Rio de Janeiro.

In order to discuss the origins of World Youth Days, we should first refer back to the personal experience of a young priest, Karol Wojtyła, who had been given a thorough Christian formation in his family home in Wadowice and the local high school. This experience was deepened in 1950s when Rev. Wojtyła was a vicar in a small village of Niegowić and at St. Florian’s in Kraków, a chaplain of college students, and later, the Auxiliary Bishop and the Metropolitan Bishop of Kraków. The period of his bishop’s office overlapped with the years of communism in Poland and

the struggle against the Church. The Church responded to those attacks by means of intensified pastoral work with youth through the activity of the Light-Life Movement, apostolic groups, altar servers, church choirs, altar-boys and lectors. Cardinal Wojtyła transferred his vast experience of working with youth to the Holy See, which largely enriched the Catholic Church.

1. The chaplain's sensitivity of Rev. Karol Wojtyła

Young Karol Wojtyła received an excellent religious education in his family home. His mother died very early, when Karol was only nine years old. His father took over the upbringing of his son and it was him who transferred a deep faith onto his son and taught him true prayer.

The early years of Karol Wojtyła were filled with his engagement into the Sodality of Our Lady (from 1935) and the school theatre. Together with his friends, he learned how to demand from oneself and how to cooperate with others in fulfilling the duties of virtue. What exerted a special impact on Karol Wojtyła's early experience were the studies of Polish literature at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków (1938–1939) and his work as a simple laborer during World War II (1940–1944). It was in that period when he discerned his priestly vocation as a desire to serve others. While working in the Solvay factory and studying philosophy and theology at an underground seminary, Karol Wojtyła reached maturity to priesthood. This experience of his youth in such difficult years, requiring self-reliance and bravery in making hard decisions, found its reflection in his later work with the young generation.

Karol Wojtyła's first chaplain work was in Niegowić, where he taught religion at village schools and cooperated with the young people from the Catholic Youth Association. He immediately set high demands for youth of Niegowić by organizing regular prayer and formation meetings.

In March 1949, after several months of working in Niegowić, Rev. Wojtyła was transferred to the Parish of St. Florian in Kraków. As a vicar, he paid a particular attention to college students and organized special evening meetings for them, devoted to discussing crucial issues of

faith. He also organized courses for brides and grooms, as well as closed retreats for youth.

In 1951, Rev. Wojtyła was given a sabbatical leave to prepare his higher doctoral dissertation (habilitation thesis) on ethics and moral theology. In that time, he lived in Kanonicza Street in Kraków, where he often invited university students. He also organized trips to the Masurian Lake District and to the mountains, which always focused on formation and prayer.

Karol Wojtyła managed to gather an informal group of people around him, the so-called “Milieu” (Polish: *Środowisko*), which despite the passing years always remained faithful to him. The effects of those formative meetings, led by Cardinal Wojtyła concurrently with his numerous official duties and academic commitments, remain noticeable also today.

2. Apostolic Letter *To young men and women in the world* (March 31st, 1985)

As soon as John Paul II commenced his pontifical in Rome, he turned to youth with special concern in the following words: “You are the hope of the Church! You are the hope of the world!” It soon appeared to be more than just rhetoric.

Similarly to his Kraków years, the Pope also in Rome continued to teach youth how to speak to Jesus and he addressed them just like the Lord talked to his disciples. His words and activities were strictly connected with the entire Gospel of Jesus Christ. This close relationship can be seen in particular when the Holy Father analyzes the conversation of Jesus with a young man, conveyed by the Evangelists.¹ Among numerous Biblical texts, this one seems to be particularly favored by John Paul II and it became a basis for writing his apostolic letter to “young men and women in the world” in 1985. The Holy Father carried out a thorough analysis of the dialogue of the Teacher from Nazareth with a young man who wanted to inherit eternal life and was invited to follow Jesus but after

¹ Cf. Mark 10:17–22; Matthew 19:16–22; and Luke 18:18–23.

hearing His words “[...] the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.”

John Paul II emphasized that the above-quoted dialogue was of a universal and timeless character. Through centuries and generations, Jesus Christ keeps talking to youth. This is why the Holy Father selected the passage on a wealthy young man in order to reach all the corners of the world and thus make a meeting with Jesus possible to everyone. Undoubtedly, any young man or woman seems to be a potential interlocutor of Jesus in this dialogue.

Definitely, World Youth Days were an initiative of the young people. The Holy Father wanted the event to provide important moments of retreat and prayerful conversation with Jesus Christ in a continuous pilgrimage of faith. The primary objective of WYD is focusing the faith and life of each and every young man and woman on the person of Jesus, so that He could become a permanent point of reference and a true light for each initiative and any educational activity directed at the young generation. The Pope referred to it as a refrain of World Youth Days.

WYDs are not an empty ritual but a providential event. The fact that massive crowds of young people came to the meetings was perceived by John Paul II as their request directed at him and all the clergy to accompany them in their pilgrimage, which was, in a way, their true response to the Lord’s grace in their hearts.

Particular elements of WYDs form a unique catechesis, i.e. an extensive program of conversion to Jesus Christ, whose starting point is the experience and fundamental questions arising in everyday lives of young people. The central point of the program is the Word of God. In addition to that, the program makes use of the catechetical reflection as a tool, is fed by prayer and its style is represented by the true understanding and dialogue.

World Youth Days have become a powerful experience of faith and communion for the young people worldwide, which helped many of them face up to deep existential problems and, through an authentic conversation with Jesus Christ, assume their responsibilities in their societies and the Church community. Let us, therefore, take a closer look at the history of youth’s prayer with John Paul II.

3. The beginnings of World Youth Days

The first World Youth Day (WYD) took place in dioceses in 1986 and its motto was: "Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope you have."² The idea, however, developed already in 1984. On Palm Sunday of that year, young people from all over the world gathered in Rome to celebrate the "International Jubilee for the Young" on the occasion of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Redemption, whereas in 1985 they celebrated the International Youth Year (IYY) proclaimed by the United Nations. This year was supposed to be celebrated mostly in local cathedrals of the entire Catholic Church, nevertheless numerous young people, especially from European countries, also gathered in Rome.

In his homily, John Paul II explained it was exactly Palm Sunday that had been selected for Youth Day. This Sunday commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem for a Passover feast. Every year we bring the palms to the church and sing: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest."³ These words were uttered especially by youth, as it is suggested in the liturgical text *Pueri Hebraeorum*.

If we were to summarize the idea of World Youth Days in just one single sentence on the basis of the pontiff's public speeches during the first, officially "numbered" meeting, we might choose the following quote from his homily: "'World Youth Day' means just this, going to encounter God." This feature will remain forever in the everyday life of the Church. Since that moment youth have always begun the Holy Week by going to the encounter with the Lord. On the days to follow, they started encouraging everyone to focus their attention on the Mystery of Jesus Christ, His Cross and Resurrection.

Let us return to the words of John Paul II, which explain the sense of establishing the tradition of World Youth Days: "You have gathered again today, dear Friends, here in Rome, at Saint Peter's Square, to begin the tradition of Youth Day, which summons the entire Church. [...] Youth Day means just this, going to encounter God, who entered the history of man

² 1 Peter 3:15.

³ Matthew 21:9.

through the Mystery of Passion of Jesus Christ. He entered it irrevocably. And He wants first to meet you, the youth.”

4. John Paul II in dialogue with youth

The theme of the 1987 World Youth Day in Buenos Aires was “We have recognized for ourselves, and put our faith in the love God has for us.”⁴ Already the day before the event, nearly a million young people, including around 60 thousand from outside Argentina, gathered for a meeting, which basically turned into a dialogue of youth with the Holy Father. Not only did the pope speak but also young people had their speeches. This time they used the language of pantomime to talk about their life. Youth also posed questions prepared during the months preceding the meeting.

At the very beginning, the crucifix, handed over to youth by the pope at the end of the Jubilee Year, was brought in. Each of the three parts of the pontiff’s address, which actually became a response to the young people’s questions, was preceded by a performance prepared by youth.

The first statement of youth was very cautious: “There is fear in us but also there is hope.” The Holy Father responded with the words of Saint John: “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.”⁵

The second statement directed at the pontiff expressed youth’s need for taking responsibility for their everyday choices: “We want to remain faithful but we are being tempted.” Opposite the statues of the most distinguished figures of Latin America, the figures of demons of contemporary times were standing: secularization, drug abuse, pornography, indifference, usury, i.e. tares sown inside the Church. The pontiff responded in the following way to the inhabitants of that continent: “Latin America, be yourself, in the name of your faith in Christ, stand firm against those who want to annihilate your vocation to hope.” As a response to these words all the crown cried out: “Latin America, rise and go!”

4 1 John 4:16.

5 1 John 4:16.

The third statement was a confession of youth from all countries: “We want to live in peace.” Five young people from five parts of the world spoke on behalf of their continents. The pope finished with the following consideration: “Faith in the love of God is not an easy task: it requires personal sacrifice, it is not satisfied with the egoistic peace of conscience, it does not leave your heart indifferent, but it makes it noble, free and fraternal.”

Summarizing WYD in Buenos Aires, I would like to focus on a message that was and still is up-to-date and expresses the awareness of the roles such meetings play in the life of the Church in the modern world. Firstly, John Paul II defined a fundamental truth about youth of spirit, which “is a continuous faithfulness to the love of God. Unity with God lets us grow in this youth on a daily basis.”

Secondly, John Paul II said: “The successor of Peter [...] came to reinforce you in faith and strengthen in hope.” For me personally, this sentence explains the difference between World Youth Days and other events resembling them or just referring to them. During Youth Days, Peter of our times is always present. It is him who reinforces in faith and strengthens in hope.

Thirdly, in Argentina John Paul II talked about the new evangelization, which “by contributing to the renewal of man and all that constitutes his existence, should become the evidence of the power of the Cross.” In the initiative of new evangelization, WYDs find their privileged place not only due to the number of youth participating directly or indirectly through the mass media, but also due to a thorough and true dialogue of “faith and seeking,” which youth carry out with Christ by means of His successor in the world.

5. Virgin Mary as a role model for youth

WYD in 1988 was celebrated in dioceses with the motto “Do whatever he tells you.”⁶ Whilst reading the message of the world meetings of youth

⁶ John 2:5.

one should not forget about the context of the Church life, in which preparations for and celebration of WYDs take place. 1988 was a Marian Year, hence the theme of Youth Day referred to that important event. Virgin Mary was presented to youth as a Mother and a Caretaker, as well as an archetype of faith experienced in a radical way.

The second event, which constituted a fundament for the preparation of WYD was the Synod of Bishops, held in 1987, on the vocation and the mission of the lay faithful in the Church and in the world. The synod fathers seemed to pay a particular attention to youth. In the message to the People of God issued after the Synod we read:

[...] youth make up an exceptional potential and a great challenge for the future of the Church. Youth are considered as an object of pastoral concern of the Church. They are encouraged to follow Jesus Christ in all the radicalism of the Cross and certainty of the Resurrection.

The address to the young people referred to the most crucial aspect of Mariology, i.e. it showed Virgin Mary as the one who leads us to Jesus. The Holy Father ensured that in the instruction given by Mary to the servants in Cana of Galilee: “Do whatever He tells you,” one can find a proper answer to the question of the sense of life.

In his homily on Palm Sunday, John Paul II once again posed a question why it was that very Sunday that had become “the feast of youth” in the Catholic Church. The pope gave the following answer:

It seems that youth themselves give a spontaneous answer to this question. The answer is, therefore, given by all of you who have been peregrinating to Rome for years exactly on this day. [...] With this fact, don't you possibly want to say that you are seeking Christ in the very center of His mystery? You look for it in the peak of this truth that He Himself is the history of man. [...] You are seeking Christ in the last word of the Gospel, just like Apostle Paul: in the Cross, which is “the power of God and the wisdom of God.”⁷

7 1 Corinthians 1:24

The idea of World Youth Days is one of the best pastoral initiatives of Saint John Paul II, whose 11th anniversary of departing to eternity comes on the day following this conference. He sowed abundantly and we harvest fruit.