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Pope's trust in Panama

1. WYD 2019 as optimistic transformation

Panamanians have the capacity to do things in an extraordinary way. Nevertheless, the lack of trust in our public institutions, in our justice system and in our own skills undermines this ability.

The truth is that this negativism prevents us from seeing the opportunities that we are given each day to make a better world, whether individually or collectively. It is in our hands to transform this reality if we commit ourselves to change what impedes our personal and social development, taking moral, ethics and honesty as parameters for our actions.

Pope Francis has offered a unique opportunity choosing us Panamanians as the venue of the next World Youth Day (WYD) in January 2019. Against all human logic, we have been chosen to offer young people from the five continents, especially those of the existential and geographical peripheries, an experience of God, but above all, of a fraternal and community (supportive, caring) encounter, without distinction of sex, language, ethnic group, religion or social class.

In his September 2017 visit to Colombia, a neighboring and brother country, the Holy Father had the kindness to refer to WYD. He explained his gift in a beautiful way, which we see as if it were the description of our mission: “I have chosen Panama, the isthmus of this continent, for the World Youth Day of 2019 that will be celebrated following the example of the Virgin Mary which proclaims: ‘Behold the handmaid’ and ‘be it done unto me’ (Lk 1:38). I am sure that in all the young people there is an isthmus, in the hearts of all our youth there is a narrow stretch of land that can be traversed to lead them to a future which only God knows and that belongs to Him. It is up to us to present them with inspiring projects to awaken in them the courage to take risks, trusting in God and to educate them to be like the Virgin, predisposed”.

In a number of environments it often happens to hear hopeless things said about youth. Not the Pope, though. He often insists on the fact that not everything is lost, because “Latin America’s hope has a young face” and warns us against letting ourselves be influenced by the caricatures that are made of youth, of its decadence and lethargy. The Catholic Church faces the challenge of opening spaces of participation, of investing time and resources in their education, with an insightful and objective educational proposal that motivates their potential.

This is the first Latin American Pope, with a leadership that goes beyond the ecclesiastical dimensions, who is willing to put this Panamanian isthmus, in the world and Church youth capital in 2019.

We want to take advantage of this opportunity to consolidate our Panamanian and Latin American identity. We want to enhance, now more than ever, the values of service, kindness, solidarity and fraternity that have always characterized us, with the joy and the colorful rhythm of our melodies.

Let us return hope to our youth and let us strive to build a Panama with possibilities for the future. We are convinced that we can achieve this, because, as the Pope correctly points out: “Our people has learned that no disillusion is enough to break it.”

As a Church we are committed to take on the challenge. Now society should join this national project, which, beyond economic gains, can give us a more united Panama, if we work for it: a more courageous youth to

change the structures of oppression and inequality, more consolidated families and, therefore, a society more willing to advance in a sustainable human development with opportunities for all.

2. A WYD with our style

What will this WYD be like? It will have a deep Panamanian style. The Catholic Church in Panama has 500 years of tradition. It was here that the first diocese was created on American mainland. Since then, more than five hundred years ago, the history of the nation has gone hand in hand with the history of the Church: that is why we are a country who are in the most part believers in the Merciful Love of the Father, always accompanied by the Mother of God under the dedication of Santa María la Antigua.

That will be the first distinguishing feature of WYD 2019. By decision of the Pope, it will be a very Marian Journey, very much focused on the Virgin Mary. We want the contents of this WYD to articulate the motto that Pope Francis has given us. We want to place before the youth the model of this young woman of Nazareth, who was a Daughter, Spouse and Mother of God, knowing that she was only “the servant of the Lord.” And we recommend to Our Lady all the young people who come, that they may follow her example saying to the Lord: “Let it be done to me according to your word.” It will be, therefore, a very vocational and Marian World Youth Day.

WYD will be a great party in Panama, as it has always been, in the four continents through which it has passed. We will give you the mood and joy of our lands. It will be a different party to the previous ones, because the way we celebrate the faith, in the midst of our pluricultural and multi-ethnic reality, allows us to share the joy of our rhythms and our folklore. This wealth will beautifully mark this World Day, where no young person will feel strange.

Everyone who has participated in a WYD knows that being the hosts of this multicultural and multitudinous gathering requires years of intense work on the part of many people.

First things first: last March we entrusted ourselves to our Mother, consecrating WYD 2019 to the Immaculate Heart of Mary surround-

ed by our Panamanian young people. Here I want to highlight that the youth of our country, of Central America and of the whole world will have an opportunity to encounter Christ, holding Mary's hand, together with Peter's successor.

Side by side with our faith is the practical work. As I am writing these lines for the commemorative book of the WYD, we have already been working for many months to prepare the scripts for the acts, the places of the central acts, the accommodation for the pilgrims and all the logistics involved in such a mass meeting. This is a real challenge for a small country like Panama, and probably the largest gathering of people in our history.

We are not alone. All the dioceses of the country are pulling together to welcome the pilgrims for the preceding days (Diocesan Days). The parishes and the centers of all ecclesiastical institutions are working with enthusiasm so that everything turns out marvelously. Thousands of families are opening their doors to make the pilgrims feel at home. All sorts of enterprises and business are collaborating to finance this WYD, which will be beautiful but sober.

Finally, the State will play an important role. World Youth Day is a project that goes beyond the ecclesial, political, religious and cultural spheres. It allows the possibility of uniting us, so that, far from politicking and opportunism, we can assume the World Youth Day as a nation, ready to recreate our differences as a treasure that allows us to be united in the diversity of expressions of faith, culture and of ethnicity.

To our young people I say: Fill World Youth Day, with our vitality, our joy, our hospitality so that when other young people see us – even non-believers – they could say: “Look, how they love each other.” It is the highest compliment you can give to a Christian community: to be able to express the merciful love of God so that others want to experience that same joy.

And to those of other countries, I say: Come, do not miss this feast of faith! Come to learn and come also to teach. Dare to be the protagonists of this meeting with the Pope and your peers from around the world. Young people, do not be afraid, dare to set out into the deep where the limit of the sea is the sky, a heaven landed on earth, where the Kingdom of God is built to go on pilgrimage until you arrive at the Heavenly Jerusalem.

I repeat: “Today we adults need you”, so “have courage to teach us that it is easier to build bridges than to build walls” and remind us to find God “in the hungry, in the thirsty, in the naked, in the sick, in the friend who has fallen into disgrace, in the one who is in prison, in the fugitive and the migrant, in the neighbor who is alone.”

All the authors who collaborate in this book can talk about what they did, how they were instruments of God, and the spiritual fruits that the Lord has sent to so many souls, through their mission. I, on the other hand, speak only of the future. We will try to learn from the previous WYD (many have shared their experiences with us) to make another unique Journey, in which the “Servant of the Lord” will shine and obtain abundant graces for Her children. Pray for us!

