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World Youth Day: a pilgrimage of faith

A distinctive characteristic of the international World Youth Days is that of **pilgrimage**, and since its inception participants have been described as pilgrims. The very structure and nature of World Youth Day is underpinned by the practice of pilgrimage, as young people from around the world journey to the host city to participate in the event. Sometimes this involves great distances and often includes travel to sacred and significant places within the Christian Tradition. This pilgrimage of youth is for a deepening of faith, as well as to build “bridges of fellowship and hope between continents, peoples, and cultures.”¹

While the term pilgrimage is increasingly used in a metaphorical sense, there is also evidence to suggest that the ancient practice of pilgrimage is on the rise in contemporary society, especially as a means of forging national, cultural, social and religious identity.

¹ John Paul II, *Letter to Cardinal Eduardo Francisco Pironio on the Occasion of the Seminar on World Youth Days Organized in Czestochowa*, 1996, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/1996/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19960508_czestochowa-gmg_en.html (30.09.2017).

The motivations for going on pilgrimage are many and varied. It has been suggested by some sociologists that given the increasing number of people who experience feelings of dislocation and rootlessness in post-modern society, pilgrimage can enable an opportunity to search for personal consciousness, meaning in life and connectedness with others.

Often described as the ‘Pilgrim Pope’, John Paul II was aware that the practice of pilgrimage could be a source of deep spiritual significance. At World Youth Day IV in Santiago de Compostela he encouraged young people to experience pilgrimage “as a way to interior renewal, to a deepening of faith, a strengthening of the sense of communion and solidarity with your brothers and sisters and as a help in discovering your personal vocation.”²

As with all pilgrimages, both religious and secular, the journey to World Youth Day has no ‘typical pilgrim’. Rather, evidence suggests that there are a number of distinct groupings, each in turn motivated by an amalgam of factors. While some pilgrims are drawn to the event as an occasion to “profess and proclaim their faith... and experience the Church as communion”³, others are excited by the prospects of travel and making new friends.

Push and pull factors also apply to World Youth Day pilgrims. While many have responded to the ‘push’ of intrinsic motivations, others have attended World Youth Day as a result of ‘pull’ factors, including the attraction of the particular host city, or the pilgrimage route. Another significant pull factor, common to many other forms of pilgrimage is the ‘appeal’ of the celebrity, in this context, the pope.

1. Pilgrimage of faith

One of the foundational elements of World Youth Day is that it is a multilayered pilgrimage of faith.

2 John Paul II, *Message to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the World Youth Day IV (Santiago de Compostela)*, 1989, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/youth/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_27111988_iv-world-youth-day_en.html (30.09.2017).

3 John Paul II, *Letter to Cardinal Eduardo Francisco Pironio...*, op. cit.

Firstly, the young people of the world are invited to periodically set out on new pilgrim paths to the different host cities so as to experience the unity in diversity of the universal Catholic Church and to forge a sense of solidarity and communion in which “frontiers between continents, cultures, races and nations disappear.”⁴ It was hoped that the event would be a cultural and religious immersion with reciprocal benefits. The international gatherings have been uniformly characterised by mutual goodwill where the pilgrims “usher one another through their journey with singing... greet one another with deference... and eagerly identify themselves with strangers.”⁵ An objective of each such pilgrimage of faith was that the experience would not just cultivate solidarity between the pilgrims but also draw out the virtue of hospitality from local communities.

The program of World Youth Day week itself, which comprises a range of sacramental, liturgical and catechetical elements, “was conceived as a pilgrimage to encourage a personal journey of conversion... that will lead to an encounter with Christ.”⁶ The rhythm of the World Youth Day experience was structured to incorporate prayer, spiritual reflection and a deepening of knowledge of the Catholic faith as a means of preparing for the major liturgical events with the Pope. Weigel suggested the rhythm of World Youth Day reflected the theology of Louis Bouyer, in that, “every significant Christian event in some fashion should recapitulate the Paschal Triduum, the core of Christian experience.”⁷

As a pilgrimage of faith, World Youth Day was intended as an experience of journey and encounter. The interior journey of pilgrims was intentionally associated with their quest for personal meaning. The ultimate

4 Benedict XVI, *Address to German Bishops* (2005, August 21) https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050821_german-bishops.html (30.09.2017).

5 J. Stafford, *The salt of the earth, the light of the world*, “L’Osservatore Romano”, July 17, 2002, p. 7.

6 F. Kohn, *Address: Youth ministry today: What response to the expectations of the Church and of young people?* Pontifical Council for the Laity, international meeting: World Youth Days 2003 and 2005, 2003. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/laity/Colonia2005/rc_pc_laity_doc_20030805_p-kohn-gmg_en.html (30.09.2017).

7 G. Weigel, *John Paul II and the priority of culture*, “First Things” (1998) 80, pp. 19–25.

goal of this searching was considered to be the encounter with Christ, which could not take place without faith and a conversion of heart.

The idea of journey and encounter was borne out in the official publication of the Pontifical Council of the Laity, *I CARE*, commemorating World Youth Day XV in Rome in 2000. Pilgrims were asked, “what have you come here to find?... Yours is just not any journey: If you have set out on pilgrimage it is not just for the sake of recreation or an interest in culture. Well then, let me ask again: What have you come in search of? Or rather, who have you come here to find?”⁸

The principal objective of World Youth Day is to enable pilgrims to encounter Jesus Christ so that he might be “the centre of the faith and life of every young person... their constant point of reference.”⁹ This search for God situates World Youth Day within the context of the pilgrimage phenomenon, which “is usually characterised by a journey to a named place where an encounter with God... is the anticipated outcome.”¹⁰

In addition to the primary objective of an encounter with the transcendent, World Youth Day is characterised by other features and dynamics which have helped define it as a ‘pilgrimage event’. These include an emphasis on

- ▶ the physical journey as a form of spiritual preparation;
- ▶ the interior journey as a means of spiritual renewal and ultimate conversion;
- ▶ travelling and gathering with both ‘like-minded people’ and strangers for the purpose of strengthening solidarity with others;
- ▶ undertaking the pilgrimage as an expression of, and witness to, faith;
- ▶ a search for personal meaning;
- ▶ the visiting of significant and sacred sites within the Christian Tradition, and
- ▶ engagement with religious symbols and rituals so that they become a cultural reference point.

⁸ Pontifical Council for the Laity, *I Care*, Rome 2000.

⁹ John Paul II, *Letter to Cardinal Eduardo Francisco Pironio...*, op. cit.

¹⁰ J. Digance, *Religious and secular pilgrimage: Journeys redolent with meaning*, in: *Tourism, religion and spiritual journeys*, eds. D. Olsen, D. Timothy, New York 2006, p. 42.

2. Elements of pilgrimage

Pope John Paul II recognised the deep spiritual significance of pilgrimages, and saw them as moments of catechesis.¹¹ He identified them as being a catalyst of personal renewal and a spiritual journey in faith, and recognised they “assumed different cultural forms in different ages.”¹²

Pope John Paul II associated pilgrimages with the missionary activity of the Church and recognised them as an effective method and expression of evangelisation. Pilgrimages are effective in reviving “interest in religion, particularly among young people”¹³ primarily because they take people out of the everyday and put them in touch with something beyond themselves.

In *The Pilgrimage of the Great Jubilee*, the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People identified the dynamics of a pilgrimage and some of the steps taken by a pilgrim. These included:

- ▶ **departure:** which reveals the decision of pilgrims to go... to the destination and achieve the spiritual objectives;
- ▶ **walking:** which leads them to solidarity with their brothers and sisters and... [prepares them] for the meeting with the Lord;
- ▶ the **visit to the Shrine:** which invites them to listen to the Word of God and to sacramental celebration, and
- ▶ the **return:** reminds them of their mission in the world¹⁴.

This framework can be applied to pilgrim participation in World Youth Day.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Message to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the World Youth Day IV...*, op. cit.

¹² John Paul II, *Incarnationis Mysterium. Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000*. http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/docs/documents/hf_jp-ii_doc_30111998_bolla-jubilee_en.html (30.09.2017).

¹³ P. Margry, *Secular pilgrimage: A contradiction in terms?*, in: *Shrines and pilgrimages in the modern world: New itineraries into the sacred*, ed. P. Margry, Amsterdam 2008, pp. 13–48.

¹⁴ Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, *The Pilgrimage in the Great Jubilee*, 1998, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/documents/rc_pc_migrants_doc_19980425_pilgrimage_en.htm (30.09.2017).

The model of pilgrimage adopted for World Youth Day has encompassed both the sacred and the secular. A number of the cities chosen to host the international gathering are traditional places of pilgrimage within Catholicism. These included:

- ▶ Santiago de Compostela (1989): famous for the tomb of Saint James the Apostle, and the pilgrimage route, the *Camino*;
- ▶ Czestochowa (1991): famous for the shrine and sanctuary of the ‘Black Virgin’, titled Our Lady of Jasna Gora;
- ▶ Cologne (2005): renowned for its Gothic cathedral and the shrine of the grand reliquary of the Maji, and
- ▶ Krakow (2016): the birthplace of Divine Mercy.

Each of these cities has attracted Christian pilgrims for centuries and they remain amongst the most popular shrines in Europe today.

In 2000, Pope John Paul II used the occasion of the ‘Great Jubilee’ to focus international attention on the significance of Rome to the Christian tradition, and he coupled this with World Youth Day XV, which, in “a year of spectacular displays of Catholicism... was perhaps the most stunning.”¹⁵ Although it “was a massive logistical exercise, it filled Rome with life”¹⁶, and received extensive and positive coverage within the media.

Weigel suggested World Youth Day XV was strategic, as it was an integral part of “the re-evangelisation of Rome, which... as the center of the Catholic world tended... to wear its Catholicism somewhat lightly, and at times even cynically.”¹⁷ The notion of ‘re-evangelisation’, or ‘new evangelisation’ as he termed it, was a priority of Pope John Paul II, who, like his successors, affirmed the need for people to discover their Christian roots.

In contrast to the cities which had a long-standing Christian heritage, World Youth Day has also been held in various modern cities in the de-

15 G. Weigel, *The end and the beginning: Pope John Paul II - the victory of freedom, the last years, the legacy*, New York 2010, p. 244.

16 J. Allen, *All the pope's men: The inside story of how the Vatican really works*, New York 2004, p. 167.

17 G. Weigel, *The end and the beginning: Pope John Paul II - the victory of freedom, the last years, the legacy...*, op. cit., p. 245.

veloped world, even cities with a relatively small, by proportion, Catholic population. In framing the various contexts for evangelisation, Pope John Paul II noted, Today the image of mission *ad gentes* is perhaps changing: efforts should be concentrated on the big cities, where new customs and styles of living arise together with new forms of culture and communication, which then influences the wider population... the future of the younger nations is being shaped in the cities.¹⁸

Denver (1993), Toronto (2002) and Sydney (2008) were host cities of the younger nations. They were chosen strategically with the intention of promoting Catholic culture and a form of ‘spiritual renewal’ in what was perceived as a secular environment. In preparation for the international gatherings, the Church authorities looked to promote local examples of exemplary religious life to inspire the young, (Saint Kateri Tekakwitha – Toronto; Blessed Mary MacKillop – Sydney), and they also hoped to use the young pilgrims to inspire the wider community, especially those indifferent to religion: “Dear young friends, Toronto is waiting for all of you who can make it. In the heart of a multi-cultural and multi-faith city, we shall speak of Christ... come and make the great avenues of Toronto resound”.¹⁹

4. Journey of the World Youth Day cross and icon: a pilgrimage of the ‘New Evangelisation’

A traditional perspective of pilgrimage is the focus on ‘place-centred’ sacredness and the multi-dimensional nature of pilgrims’ journeys. For many Christians, the journey to the sacred site is a personal witness to their faith, “in which the feeling of union with other believers represents an important act.”²⁰

18 John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio – On the permanent validity of the Church’s missionary mandate*, 1990,

http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html (30.09.2017).

19 John Paul II, *Message to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the XVI World Youth Day (Toronto)*, 2001 http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/youth/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20010731_xvii-world-youth-day_en.html (30.09.2017).

20 B. Vukonic, *Tourism and Religion*, Oxford 1996, p. 245.

While mindful of the “special significance of setting out to go to sacred places”²¹, Pope John Paul II diversified approaches to pilgrimage. He called upon young people to periodically “set out along the roads of the world.”²² This was to be an inversion of the traditional approach of pilgrimage and represented a desire of the Pope to involve young people in the Church’s missionary activity and enable them to be active witnesses to their faith.

This “pilgrimage of faith” model, which represented a method of the ‘new evangelisation’, became a major theme of the Pope’s World Youth Day writings and general apostolic writings. At World Youth Day VIII in Denver Pope John Paul II challenged young people, “do not be afraid to go out on the streets and into public places... to take up the challenge of making Christ known in the modern metropolis.”²³

The journeys of the World Youth Day Cross and Icon have become a tangible representation of this.

At the conclusion of the Holy Year of Redemption, Pope John Paul II presented a large wooden Cross (3.8 metres high) to the young people of the world, and said to them, “I entrust to you the sign of this Jubilee Year: the Cross of Christ! Carry it throughout the world as a symbol of Christ’s love for humanity.”²⁴

While the Cross, which became known as the World Youth Day Cross, has been an integral element of the international gatherings, it has also served a particular missionary and catechetical purpose. On the twentieth anniversary of its reception, Pope John Paul II reflected, “during its pilgrimages it has crossed continents. As a torch is passed from hand to hand... it has become a luminous sign of the trust that animates the young generations of the third millennium.”²⁵

21 John Paul II, *Incarnationis Mysterium. Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000*.

22 John Paul II, *Letter to Cardinal Eduardo Francisco Pironio...*, op. cit.

23 John Paul II, *Homily at the Final Mass on the Occasion of World Youth Day VIII (Denver) 1993*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1993/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19930815_gmg-denver_en.html (30.09.2017).

24 John Paul II., *Remarks by Pope John Paul II to young people to whom he entrusts the Jubilee Year Cross of Redemption*, 1985, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1984/april/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19840422_cross-youth.html (30.09.2017).

25 John Paul II, *Palm Sunday Homily by Pope John Paul II*, 2004, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20040404_palm-sunday.pdf (30.09.2017).

The year before, the Pope added a further element to the pilgrimage, an Icon of Our Lady, *Salus Populi Romani*, based on the original icon in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. The symbols of the Cross and the Icon were a reflection of the Pope's theological emphases, redemption and salvation through Christ, and the companionship of Mary.

The pilgrimage of the World Youth Day Cross and Icon has become an established tradition for the Catholic Church. While the pilgrimage serves as a form of pastoral preparation for World Youth Day, typically for a period of twelve months in each host country, the symbols of the Cross and Icon, are taken regularly throughout the world. The website of the Pontifical Council of the Laity details the journeys that have been made over the last thirty years, and cites a range of testimonials as to their overall effect.

Pope John Paul II was aware of the powerful symbolism of the Cross, and reflected "the cross of Christ must not be emptied of its power."²⁶ Rather, he wanted to see an evangelisation of culture through which religious symbols could become cultural reference points.

As with their predecessor Pope John Paul II, Popes Benedict XVI and Francis, have reiterated the cultural and spiritual significance of the journey of the World Youth Day Cross and Icon as a means of fusing faith and culture. At the Stations of Cross in Rio de Janeiro, Pope Francis reflected, "the World Youth Day Cross has travelled to every continent and through a variety of human situations. It is, as it were, almost 'steeped' in the life experiences of the countless young people who have seen it and carried it... no one can approach and touch the Cross of Jesus without leaving something of himself or herself there, and without bringing something of the Cross of Jesus into his or her own life."²⁷

This contemporary pilgrimage is not a quest for the sacred but a journey with the sacred. *In the light of the Cross*, Fr Chris Ryan (2009) de-

26 John Paul II., *Evangelium Vitae* – Social Encyclical on the value and inviolability of human life, 1995, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae_en.html (30.09.2017).

27 Francis, *Address for the Way of the Cross with Young People*, 2013, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130726_gmg-via-crucis-rio.html (30.09.2017).

tailed the journey around Australia prior to World Youth Day 2008 in Sydney. Ryan identified that the Cross evoked strong emotional responses from people, many of whom wanted to touch, hold, kiss or embrace the Cross, and in so doing they felt “the physical action mediated a deep spiritual truth”, they were encountering Christ.²⁸ For others, the symbol of the Cross brought on feelings of anguish and grief, for others, curiosity and interest. Just as the meaning and relevance of sacred sites is often contested, so too there is often contestation regarding the significance of religious symbols.

5. Conclusion

As with all pilgrimages, World Youth Day involves internal and external journeys, both of which are central elements. It was conceived as a pilgrimage of faith, which through cultural immersions and encounters would strengthen the bonds of fellowship between different peoples.

The external journey, which serves as a time of preparation for the international gathering, is considered to be of significance, for travelling “which offers us the possibility of admiring the beauty of peoples, cultures and nature, can lead to God and be the occasion of an experience of faith.”²⁹ Within pilgrimages, the external journey and the internal quest are simultaneous, and through the synergy between them personal meaning is often discovered and spiritual needs fulfilled.

Although pilgrimage involves a plurality of motivations, empirical research has found that religious convictions are the primary reason underpinning a person’s decision to travel on a religious pilgrimage, and the pilgrims generally have a high level of religiosity. This is especially the case when it involves a destination associated with sacred texts. The travel is considered to be central to an adherent’s beliefs, or the pilgrimage is ‘un-

28 C. Ryan, *In the light of the Cross. Reflections on the Australian journey of the World Youth Day Cross and Icon*, Sydney 2008, p. 17.

29 Benedict XVI, *Message for the VII World Congress on the pastoral care of tourism*, 2012 http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/pont-messages/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20120418_pastorale-turismo_en.html (30.09.2017).

conventional' and relates to an extra-ordinary event, e.g. a canonization, Jubilee 2000.

Although World Youth Day was established in 1986 and thirteen international gatherings have been held to date, its definition as a pilgrimage is complex, as it combines conventional and extra-ordinary aspects of the pilgrimage phenomenon. While its pilgrim trails typically involve 'sacred texts, people and places', its ultimate physical destination varies from gathering to gathering. It is conventional in that it involves interior and exterior journeys, but it is also unconventional in its use of the World Youth Day Cross and Icon, which is an inversion of the typical structure of pilgrimage.

World Youth Day is a conventional pilgrimage in respect to the motivations of its participants. While many pilgrims have strong religious convictions, this is rarely the sole motivation for their involvement. As with other forms of pilgrimage, World Youth Day pilgrims are drawn by a range of secondary motives. For some, these alternatives may be the primary motivation. According to Post, Pieper & Van Uden this may be as many as 20, and includes the opportunity for travel and tourism.³⁰ Other motives named by Timothy and Olsen include: patriotic stirrings, a chance to admire the architectural or natural beauty of a place, curiosity about different cultures, and the opportunity for deep soul searching.³¹ As pilgrimage is often a collective experience others are also motivated by fraternal instincts and the possibility of establishing connection with fellow pilgrims.

French sociologist Hervieu-Léger suggested the motif of 'pilgrimage' aptly described the search for meaning and religious identity being made by young people in modern society³². Hervieu-Léger identified young people as 'pilgrims' and suggested there was great fluidity in the spiritual journeys which shaped their religious identification, and their religious sociability was often "characterised by mobility and temporary association."³³

30 P. Post, J. Pieper, M. van Uden, *The modern pilgrim: Multidisciplinary explorations of Christian Pilgrimage*, Leuven 1998.

31 *Tourism, religion and spiritual journeys*, eds. D. J. Timothy, D. H. Olsen, New York 2006, p. 276.

32 D. Hervieu-Léger, *La religion en mouvement: Le pèlerin et le converti*, Paris 1999.

33 T. Zijderfeld, *Cyberpilgrims: The construction of spiritual identity in cyberspace*, 2008 (Masters thesis, Utrecht University, The Netherlands) <http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/29589> (30.09.2017).

World Youth Day was established to respond to young peoples' search for meaning and religious identity. It was hoped that the international gathering and its associated pilgrimages would "foster ever greater involvement and participation" in the life of the Church³⁴ rather than a temporary association.

The theoretical framework for pilgrimages suggested by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (1998) highlighted the significance of 'return'. After a process of journey and encounter it is envisaged that pilgrims have been changed by their experience, for pilgrimages serve as rites of passage or consolidation involving the "transformation of one's inner state and outer status."³⁵

With World Youth Day this transformation may involve a strengthening of religious identity, whereby the young "are not only evangelized, they also become evangelizers who carry the Gospel to their peers."³⁶

At the end of the Jubilee Year, which included World Youth Day XV, Pope John Paul II drew upon the motif of pilgrimage to encourage people to utilize and sustain their experiences of journey and encounter upon their return, after the enthusiasm of the Jubilee, it is not to a dull everyday routine that we return. On the contrary, if ours has been a genuine pilgrimage, it will have as it were stretched our legs for the journey still ahead.³⁷

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³⁴ John Paul II, *Letter to Cardinal Eduardo Francisco Pironio...*, op. cit.

³⁵ *Pilgrimage: Past and present in the world religions*, eds. S. Coleman, J. Elsner, Cambridge 2008, p. 6.

³⁶ John Paul II, *Letter to Cardinal Eduardo Francisco Pironio...*, op. cit.

³⁷ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Apostolic Letter to the Bishops, Clergy and Lay Faithful at the close of the Jubilee Year 2000, 2001 http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte_en.html (30.09.2017).

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