

The influence of World Youth Day on youth ministry in Europe

Fr Michel Remery, Vice-Secretary General of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE)

Twitter: @donmichelremery

No-one working with youth can deny that World Youth Day (WYD) plays an important role for youth pastoral care in Europe, as also is the case in other continents. WYD is a well-known phenomenon and we shall not dwell on its history as initiated by Pope Saint John Paul II here, for there are several excellent overviews of this¹. This article intends to analyse several aspects of the way in which WYD has influenced regular and everyday youth ministry in dioceses and bishops' conferences based on available literature and the author's experience in Europe. This effect is not always recognised. For example, it is surprising that a study of the youth ministry scape in Malta – thorough in almost every sense – did not mention WYD in its survey². Below we intend to highlight a number of ways in which WYD has influenced regular youth pastoral care.

Street preachers

In his encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis spoke about young people as street preachers, *calleros de la fe* in Spanish. Maybe we might render this term as “pilgrim missionaries”, because “street preacher” might evoke someone standing in the market square on a vegetable crate yelling that the end is nigh and that we need to repent. Whilst not wishing to exclude possible conversions of the heart thanks to such practice, this may not always be the best approach, at least in Europe. What strikes us as more effective seems to be a preaching that is accompanied – and often preceded – by a Christian way of life able to make a difference in the world. Probably this is precisely how we should interpret the words of Pope

1 Cfr. e.g. Paweł ZUCHNIEWICZ, *Szukałem Was. Jan Paweł II i Światowe dni Młodzieży*, Radom 2005; Mimmo MUOLO, *Generazione GMG. La storia della Giornata Mondiale della Gioventù*, Ancora, Milano 2011; Jan BALIK, *Giovanni Paolo II in dialogo con i giovani*, Roma 2013.

2 Cfr. *Grassroots. The youth ministry scape in Malta*, Diocesan Commission KDZ, St. Venera 2014, 46-49: “Census Youth and Adolescences 2013”.

Francis, when he says: "How beautiful it is to see that young people are *street preachers* (*callejeros de la fe*), joyfully bringing Jesus to every street, every town square and every corner of the earth!"³ This is not a utopian vision, it is something those working with young people have all witnessed. Young people returning from World Youth Day, trying to live as good Christians displaying care for the people around them, speaking with enthusiasm of their WYD experience including their encounter with Christ are very strong and convincing evangelizers. They preach the Gospel wherever they go like pilgrim missionaries, without any official "soap box" or preaching platform to stand on, simply witnessing their enthusiasm for the Lord and His Church. In this way, WYD has contributed a lot to the New Evangelization called for by all recent Popes. As Pope Francis says to those responsible for youth ministry in Europe: "While you sow the Word of the Lord in this vast field that is European youth, you have the opportunity for bearing witness to the reasons for the hope that is within you, with gentleness and respect. You are able to help the young to realise that faith is not opposed to reason, and thus to accompany them as they become joyful agents for the evangelization of their peers"⁴.

For those working with youth today it may be difficult to imagine youth pastoral care without WYD. Still, there was a time only 30 years ago, when the first WYD had still to be announced. Of course, there were all kinds of initiatives for young people, all around the globe. Just to mention one more or less random example, we can look to Saint John Paul II, who as a young priest used to take groups of young people into the mountains for canoeing trips, during which they would have endless discussions about topics of faith. If there is one image that is emblematic for Catholic youth pastoral care, it is that of a canoe turned over, placed on top of some stones, and changed into an altar: here everything discussed and experienced can be offered to the Lord Himself. Every youth pastor will be able to come up with other images, maybe in line with the long dialogue

3 Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Evangelii Gaudium*, Vatican City 24 Nov. 2013, n. 106.

4 Pope Francis, *Letter to the participants of the IV European Conference on Youth Ministry*, Vatican City 11 Dec. 2014.

sessions I used to have myself with young people at the church door after Mass, which eventually led to the international project *Tweeting with GOD* which attempts to do precisely that: join dialogues about faith with that which is most important and central: our relationship with the Lord⁵. In this context Pope Francis says: "Youth pastoral ministry must engage with the questions posed by the youth of today, and from this starting point, initiate a real and honest dialogue to bring Christ into their lives. And a true dialogue in this sense can be achieved by those who experience a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus, which then overflows into their relationships with their brethren"⁶.

Cohesion

We must conclude that there were many initiatives pertaining to youth pastoral care even before the institution of World Youth Day. So what has changed in youth pastoral care with the introduction of WYD? Before WYD there were indeed small and large groups of youth pastoral care, though often without the cohesion we observe today. In many places WYD has helped to bring these groups together and in some countries it was as a result of WYD that a proper national youth office was set up. For example, in the Principality of Monaco diocesan youth ministry started in 2000 with WYD. Now the mission of youth ministry is being expanded with those in charge of education and vocation ministry. In Poland there is no national office for youth pastoral care. There is however a WYD office which also has been tasked to coordinate the pastoral care of young people on a national level.

Obviously, with regard to national structures for youth ministry there are great differences between the countries of Europe. Some, such as Portugal, have placed much emphasis on this theme for a long time. Where many countries have separate departments dealing with youth,

5 Cfr. Michel REMERY, *Tweeting with GOD. Big Bang, prayer, Bible, sex, Crusades, sin, career*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2015; www.tweetingwithgod.com.

6 Pope Francis, *Letter to the participants of the IV European Conference on Youth Ministry*, Vatican City 11 Dec. 2014.

university pastoral care, vocations, etc., France has joined all these areas of operation into one great council for the pastoral care of children and youth. On the contrary, England and Spain do not have a large national structure, as it is a tradition to do as much as possible at individual diocese level. Germany and Italy on the contrary are examples of countries where the national structure is given much more importance. It should be clear that in a number of countries in the East of Europe it was only after the great changes of the 1990s that national structures were set up. In Croatia this was the case in 2002, and an obvious influence of WYD can be observed in the biannual national youth day that gathers over 30.000 young people from all around the country. Depending on time and place, national and international circumstances have led to different set-ups. Still, some general tendencies can be observed.

The great strength of WYD is that it has given enthusiasm to sometimes large groups of youth from the same country, and a new awareness of the importance of a New Evangelization. Seeing tens of thousands (and more!) young people like themselves is extremely important for each of the participants, especially when they come from a largely secularized country, or from a country where for various reasons they would not see large groups of faithful together, let alone young faithful. The same goes for their pastors, who also return from WYD with a new enthusiasm.

With good reason an important slogan of WYD is “Young people and the Pope together”. Not only does WYD lead to more cohesion between the members of local Churches, but it also helps to see their group in the perspective of the universal Church as led by the Pope. So many young people have been touched profoundly by this experience, as a result of which their lives change drastically⁷. WYD has helped many young people to discover that the Pope is part of our Church, and thus of our life as Christians, leading our Church community as one flock towards Jesus. Thus, this two or three-yearly international youth meeting

7 Cfr. e.g. Paweł ZUCHNIEWICZ, *Miracles of John Paul II*, Toronto 2006, pp. 144-171; François VAYNE – Ariane ROLLIER, *Jean-Paul II, les jeunes et les JMJ*, Parole et Silence 2005, pp. 138-139.

has led to cohesion between local youngsters, to cohesion between youth groups in the local Church, but also to cohesion between individuals and groups on the one hand with the Universal Church on the other.

Diversity

Before World Youth Day, local youth ministry often reflected mainly the own reality of a given group. It was difficult to have an image of how things could be different, as only few young individuals and few pastors had had the opportunity to meet and experience other dimensions of our Catholic Church. Of course it is correct to say that the means of communication were not as fast and globalized as today, and it is worth bearing in mind that other factors may also play a role.

This brings us to another important element of WYD, namely the discovery of diversity of the Church. Unified as we are under and with one leader the Pope, there are at the same time many colours and ways of being Catholic. WYD has helped many youngsters to open their eyes to the very different realities of which our Church consists. This helps us to realize that our own way of doing things may not be the best way, and definitely is not the *only* way to be a Catholic.

Observing diversity often is a wonderful starting point for a conversation about faith and about the history and present of our Church. For example, I myself have spoken to young people who had their first opportunity to see the beautiful – to them tiara-like – mitre worn by Bishops of the Oriental Rites, which led to their discovery of a completely new reality within our one Catholic Church. I am also thinking of Maria, a young person who came to ask me once during WYD what I thought about the female protestant pastor, complete with roman collar and miniskirt, who was parading in front of our lodging with her arm around her husband, also a protestant pastor, and also wearing a roman collar. Some of the themes we discussed subsequently with her group at and after WYD included Protestantism, purgatory, married priests, the validity of the Sacraments, chastity and the best way of living one's

sexuality. In another situation, the group might have been too shy or uninspired to ask these questions, which were provoked by observing the diversity between Christians.

Enthusiasm

We all know examples of people that underwent a permanent change during World Youth Day. With their enthusiasm they subsequently became youth leaders in our local Churches⁸. It is precisely this enthusiasm that has encouraged groups of young people, together with their pastors, to structure or re-structure youth pastoral care. Enthusiasm is a very important fruit of World Youth Day, and it will be mentioned several times in this article. This enthusiasm is such that even a controversial secular writer like Michel Houellebecq, who went to WYD in Paris “out of curiosity”, was impressed by the faces of young people who attended the event⁹.

There is also a more general kind of enthusiasm that is brought back home from WYD. This can be experienced in many dioceses and parishes, often already during the time leading up to WYD, and which continues to mark its follow-up. This enthusiasm, both general and individual, is one of the most important ways in which WYD influences life in the local Church. In fact, asked about the impact of WYD on youth ministry in their respective countries, many national delegations operating in this field mentioned enthusiasm as one of the main factors that inspired change.

Prayer

For a number of young people World Youth Day is the first encounter with prayer and the sacraments, notably the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. Others have been able to deepen their relation with the Lord in prayer, or have discovered new ways to pray. WYD demonstrates that prayer and enjoyment can go together. Just think of the prayer vigil, which beautifully combines festivities with prayer, and instruction with contemplation. Often this vigil

8 Cfr. François VAYNE – Ariane ROLLIER, *Jean-Paul II, les jeunes et les JMJ*, Parole et Silence 2005, pp. 108-111.

9 Cfr. Marie CHAUDEY – Jean-Pierre DENIS, “Michel Houellebecq : ‘Je ne suis plus athée’”, *La Vie*, 29 Jan. 2015.

is the moment when the words of the Pope reach deepest in the hearts of the participants, who have all night to contemplate them as they continue to party. As Becquart noted, young Catholics have a great inner thirst for liturgy and prayer¹⁰.

Some of the participants are rather experienced when it comes to prayer, others do not know much about it... yet. However, for each of the participants there is something to be found. Moreover, this experience of prayer often gives young people a taste for prayer, one they bring home and which leads them to start prayer groups and search for other ways to continue their encounter with Jesus Christ. I am thinking of Flavia, who during the prayer vigil in Madrid came to me at the entrance of the adoration tent, where she had just experienced deep within herself that Jesus was calling her to put everything aside to serve him. She wanted to go and see her boyfriend, to whom she had been engaged, and tell him right there and then that she would no longer marry him. During our conversation we discovered that in fact that decision would be a bit too hasty. This experience during WYD was the start of a long path of personal prayer and pastoral accompaniment in daily life. "This pastoral ministry", said Pope Francis, "consists of walking with them, accompanying them personally in the complex and at times difficult contexts in which they are immersed"¹¹. Today Flavia is very happily married. And that brings us to yet a further point.

Vocations

Among those working in youth ministry today, there are many "Sons and daughters of World Youth Day". They were young people who found their vocation partly or fully during WYD¹². From the beginning, WYD has had a great influence on the ability of young people to choose their vocation. The reason for this is found in all the elements mentioned above: *Cohesion* in the sense of belonging to a

10 Cfr. Nathalie BECQUAERT, *Evangeliser les jeunes adultes dans le souffle des JMJ*, Paris 2013, p. 21 [Documents Épiscopat, N. 12/2013]

11 Pope Francis, *Letter to the participants of the IV European Conference on Youth Ministry*, Vatican City 11 Dec. 2014.

12 Cfr. Paweł ZUCHNIEWICZ, *Narodzini Pokolenia JP2*, Warszawa 2007, esp. pp. 104-153.

Church where each has his or her own contribution to bring; *Diversity* in the sense that one does not have to do what others do and instead everyone has a personal vocation; *Enthusiasm* in the sense of seeing that it is possible to choose enthusiastically what is really important to us; *Prayer* because it is the person of Jesus Christ who is calling, and no-one else. In fact, this global view of vocation is precisely what Citrini refers to in the Italian dictionary on the pastoral care of vocations when he says: "taking 'vocation' in the most open dynamic sense, every pastoral moment is vocational, as far as it concerns the response of a person to the voice of God and the conditions of this response: this is how it always was"¹³. Hence Pope Francis says: "Youth pastoral ministry is required to offer to the young a path of vocational discernment, to prepare them to follow Jesus on the way of conjugal and family life, or that of special consecration in the service of God's Kingdom"¹⁴.

Event

One of the complaints you may hear against World Youth Day is that it might become too much of a singular event, not rooted in the daily life of the young faithful and the Church. This criticism is partly understandable. In the case of those who consider WYD not related to the regular pastoral care of youth, this criticism is even justified. But that is precisely the point: if prepared for and lived out correctly, WYD cannot but have a great influence on youth pastoral care. It is my own experience, shared by many, that for those who participate wholeheartedly in WYD it is impossible to return unchanged. I have seen quite a few editions, and brought home something different from each of them.

In the first place there is the immediate preparation of WYD. If taken seriously, the group meets at least a few times beforehand to discuss practical details, but also to pray and to prepare spiritually. And after the WYD event

13 Tullio CITRINI, "Vocazione (Teologia della)", in: *Dizionario di Pastorale Vocazionale*, Editrice Rogate, Roma 2002, p. 1290.

14 Pope Francis, *Letter to the participants of the IV European Conference on Youth Ministry*, Vatican City 11 Dec. 2014.

there is the continuation of pastoral care. This follow-up is of great importance for the success of WYD. In this way, the one-time experience of WYD becomes part of the larger system of pastoral care for youth, in groups, parishes, dioceses and Church provinces.

Another important element of World Youth Day is the effect it has on the host country. Superficial observers mainly speak only about a possible financial deficit of the local WYD Church. There is however much more to say about the effect of WYD on hosting Churches, an impact which cannot be expressed in financial figures – although a Catholic population with new élan will surely render Sunday collections more fruitful! But the main change is in the attitude of the faithful. From the beginning, thousands of younger and older volunteers belonging to the local Church work together for the success of the event. It is beyond the scope of this article to study this effect in detail, but as mentioned above the event can have a lasting effect precisely because people are being changed by it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us observe once more the elements evoked above, to try to see some relation between these and their influence on the organization of youth pastoral care in our countries. Becquaert asked young French people who signed up for World Youth Day in Madrid why they wanted to go. The three most quoted answers were: “To live out a strong spiritual experience”, “To meet young people from all around the world”, and “To give to the world a dynamic view of the Church”¹⁵. Although in other countries the answers might be different, the quotes contain much from what has been discovered in this article.

The *cohesion* experienced within one's own group, the local Church and with the universal Church has an important influence on the daily pastoral care of young people, initiated by participants themselves and the pastors that

¹⁵ Nathalie BECQUAERT, *Evangeliser les jeunes adultes dans le souffle des JMJ*, Paris 2013, p. 22 [Documents Episcopat, N. 12/2013]

accompany them during WYD. Also, the *diversity* experienced during the WYD pilgrimage leads to a broader view of what Church is about and how Church should be. In more secular countries it has helped to establish a stronger position against certain circulating criticism of faith and Church, whilst in more traditionally Catholic countries it has helped to see that also in a more secularized environment faith is possible. Whichever way it is looked at, the message is that you are not alone! We are many and diverse, both locally and universal. Such is the Catholic Church.

The *enthusiasm* brought home from WYD has given a great impulse to existing youth pastoral care, and has stimulated the development of very different new initiatives. In this sense one can truly speak of a renewal of youth pastoral care brought about by the participation of groups of young people to WYD. In many cases, the encounter with *prayer* during WYD, has led to a desire to learn more and to work on a personal relationship in prayer with Jesus Christ. On the basis of the WYD experience, together with the experience of prayer, many young people have been able to take that final step, or to initiate or continue a path towards embracing their personal vocation in life. In his encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis describes the importance of everyday pastoral care, so that “despite the present crisis of commitment and communal relationships, many young people are making common cause before the problems of our world and are taking up various forms of activism and volunteer work. Some take part in the life of the Church as members of service groups and various missionary initiatives in their own dioceses and in other places.” (EG106). That is indeed the desired result of WYD, which is therefore much more than an event: those who live the days of WYD with openness and surrender will not return unchanged to their daily lives. Young pilgrim missionaries back from WYD are the best evangelizers of their peers¹⁶. They are like Jesus’ disciples¹⁷: their meeting

16 Nathalie BECQUAERT, *L'évangélisation des jeunes, un défi. Église@jeunes2.0, Entretiens avec Yves de Gentil-Baichis*, Paris 2013, p. 72-73.

17 Cfr. Luke 24:28-34; John 1:35-41.

with the Lord, perhaps during WYD, has a lasting effect on their daily lives and those of others.