

“You are not the future, but the ‘now’ of God.”

Pope Francis and the youth in Panama

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Some people ask if the World Youth Day still makes any sense today. Is this formula no longer exhausted, or should it not be changed? There are questions about whether the preparations are not too engaging and too expensive, and at the same time are they fruitful in any way. Do they refer to the life of the parish or diocese?

The answer to this questions, gave us the past synod of bishops about youth:

World Youth Day – the fruit of a prophetic insight of Saint John Paul II, who continues to inspire young people in the third millennium – and national and diocesan meetings, play an important part in the lives of many young people, since they offer a living experience of faith and communion that can help them meet life’s great challenges and responsibly take their place in society and in the Church. These gatherings can feed into and enrich the ordinary pastoral accompaniment provided by individual communities, where the Gospel has to be shared and translated into life decisions.(FD 16)

In my speech, I will refer to the experiences of Polish youth who took part in this year's World Youth Day in Panama. It seems to me, that many of these experiences are not strange to young people from other European countries.

1. What are World Youth Day?

Certainly, for the participants of this meeting this introduction will seem obvious, but I would like to talk about it anyway. It will also help me to explain how the World Youth Day is becoming an integral part of the youth ministry in Poland.

WYD is a pilgrimage followed by young people from around the world, with the Pope and their bishops. There is an experience of faith, a place of listening to the Word of God, a place of catechesis, mission, testimony, experience of the universality of the Church. There is an opportunity to experience the difficulty of pilgrimages (different language, climate, culture, people, as well as housing conditions) but also joy.

We must not forget that WYD takes place in two dimensions - diocesan and worldwide. The diocesan dimension is according to the intention of Saint John Paul II, like every Palm Sunday. The Pope writes: The V World Youth Day 1990 will be celebrated on Palm Sunday in each of your dioceses. It is precisely *the diocesan Church* that you must discover. The Church is not an abstract and disembodied reality. On the contrary, it is a very concrete reality: precisely, a diocesan Church gathered around the Bishop, successor of the Apostles. It is also the *parish Church* that you must discover, its life, its needs and the many communities that exist and work within it. You will bring to this Church the joy and the enthusiasm you have experienced in world-wide encounters like that of Santiago and in the meetings of the movements and associations to which you belong. In this concrete Church you young people must be living and fruitful branches; you must, that is, be conscious and responsible sharers in its mission. Welcome this Church with all its spiritual riches; welcome it in the person of your Bishops, of the Priests, of the Religious and also of your brothers and sisters in the faith; welcome it with faith and with filial love.

(Oređzie Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II z okazji V Światowego Dnia Młodzięzy)

The messages that the Holy Father announces help us to discover the continuous (linear) character of the next World Youth Days, and the connection between WYD in the diocesan and universal dimensions.

(The World Day, as you see, is not only a festival, but also a serious spiritual commitment. To be able to gather its fruits, it is necessary to follow a *path of preparation* under the guidance of your Pastors in the dioceses, in the parishes, in the associations, the movements and the ecclesial communities for youth. Try to know the Church better: her nature, her two thousand years of history, and her present situation. Try to discover your place in the Church and your mission as young people.)

During my speech, I will not focus on the fruits of WYD, because it is a topic prepared by Fr. Joao Chagas from the Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life, but on two other levels - preparation that in our reality has resulted in more than 4,000 Poles present in Panama and this event itself.

1. Preparation

The Pope in his message for the 33rd World Youth Day wrote: *Dear young people, the Lord, the Church, the world are waiting for your answer to the unique call that each one receives in this life! As World Youth Day in Panama draws closer, I invite you to prepare yourselves for our gathering with the joy and enthusiasm of those who wish to participate in such a great adventure. WYD is for the courageous! Not for young people who are searching only for comfort and who withdraw whenever difficulties arise. Do you accept the challenge?*

From the very beginning, we have tried to emphasize the fact (in the preparation at the national level for WYD), that a trip to Central America is not a difficulty, but a challenge. The biggest problem was convincing bishops and priests that "someone from Poland will go." Resistance associated with the cost of travel, distance, and later the dates, as it turned out, WYD in Panama met with great enthusiasm of Poles. This enthusiasm was, of course, the fruit of the World Youth Day in Krakow. By the way, I would like to mention that among the pilgrims, which, as I said, there were over 4,000 Polish people, there was a very large number of volunteers (in the registration system it is altogether over 300 people). As a direct fruit of WYD in Krakow, we also see over 650 people from the Krakow Archdiocese alone.

At this point, I would like to briefly describe how preparation for each subsequent World Youth Day, looks like in Poland. Work at the national level is coordinated by the WYD National Office, created more than 20 years ago by the then delegate of the Polish Bishops' Conference on Youth Bishop Henryk Tomasik (now the Bishop of Radom) and Fr. Grzegorz Suchodolski (of whom I am an unworthy successor in this position). In each diocese, the bishops appoint the diocesan coordinator of WYD, who in almost 80% of the dioceses is at the same time the director of the youth ministry department or the diocesan youth priest. In the remaining 20% he is a deputy director or is in the diocesan structure of youth ministry. This is important because the National Office for WYD is at the same time the secretariat of the Youth Ministry Council of the Polish Bishops' Conference. Such a structure makes preparation for WYD in the general dimension and subsequent WYD in the diocesan dimension an integral part of youth pastoral work in Poland. Papal messages for particular years become a program for youth pastoral care. It allows us to form young people according to what the Holy Father says to them (to us). The theme given by the

Pope in the message is always the main theme of the pastoral year for youth. We try to make the young Church in Poland breathe in the Pope's words and in this way became more and more a part of the universal Church. It also allowed us to integrate the preparations for the synod and then to reflect on the youth about the synod (also according to the thought of Pope Francis, who repeatedly stressed the connection between the Synod about youth and World Youth Day in Panama).

After the World Youth Days in Krakow, we all waited impatiently for the next topics.

Pope Francis has chosen three main topics of the next World Youth Day in the diocesan and global dimension.

XXXII ŚDM 2017 “The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name” (Lc 1,49)

XXXIII ŚDM 2018 „Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God” (LC 1,30)

XXXIV ŚDM Panama 2019 „I am the servant of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Łk 1,38)

The spiritual path that Pope Francis has left, is the continuation of the last three threads of WYD in 2014-2016, emphasizing the importance of the Blessings. As we know, Mary is the one that all generations called "blessed" (Luke 1.48 "For behold, all generations will now bless me").

During the meeting with the WYD volunteers at the TAURON Arena Krakow, Pope Francis spoke about the attitude of Mary, Mother of Jesus and left her to the young pilgrims as role model. In spontaneous dialogue with young people, the Holy Father reminded us of three important principles that should be our everyday compass: he asked young people to remember the past, have courage to live in the present and have (be) hope for the future.

The three themes mentioned by Pope Francis clearly marked the Mary character of the spiritual pilgrimage to which the young Pope invites. They show the young on the way: between the past (2017), the present (2018) and the future (2019).

All these themes are also met in the pope's selection of the theme of the Synod of Bishops, which took place in 2018: "Youth, faith and vocational discernment".

In the spiritual preparation, in the first stage we tried to focus on reading the words of the Pope from Krakow (we implemented the "Get Out From the Sofa" program), while considering the messages from 2017-2018. The next stage was the program "Here I am ...", which led us straight in the direction of Panama. Both nationwide programs were to be a source of inspiration for dioceses and parishes. We tried to make it "as low as possible".

It should be added here, that the youth in Poland are very fond of Pope Francis. His openness, commitment, simplicity, authenticity and spontaneity move. But also touches his words - many times I have meet with the statement that the Pope says "to hearts." The new style is important for the young people (not only the word in the texts, but in the form of short clips), language (the Pope's example during the recent WYD, Mary as an influencer) and openness (it is difficult to count selfie with Pope Francis, which like lightning are spreading on social media). In addition, the young people pay attention to the fact that the Pope does not avoid difficult subjects, he is very concrete, and additionally gives young people specific tasks.

Because the pope, presenting the figure of Mary, paid attention to her trust, commitment, and prayer - which is why these elements became an integral part of the preparations. From the date of WYD was published in Panama, the 22nd of the month was declared a day of prayer for WYD in Poland (later it was extended to other countries). Young people gathered every month for formation meetings, to prepare well for the trip, but also to make this trip a pilgrimage and not a tourist trip. Many dioceses, but also individual parishes, undertook various initiatives to raise funds for the trip. Many Panamanian meetings were organized in the parishes, where were presenting the unknown country and its inhabitants or just WYD Sundays. There were really many initiatives. We have published two books - one on Panama and the other on the patrons of WYD in Panama in the context of synod and vocational discernment. We also tried to promote WYD- using social media as well as YouTube.

We must not fail to mention the students who made up a significant part of the Polish delegation. For students, the time of this year's WYD was the time of winter exams. Many

students took the trouble to ask their professors to be able to pass them on another date. There were also those, who were very courageous and went straight to the universities to take exams.

I devote so much space to WYD preparation, because without this, it is impossible to understand the participation and reception of WYD by young people from Poland.

2. Pope Francis and young people in Panama.

Pope Francis, during the last Mass, at the end of WYD in Panama 2019, said:

You, dear young people, are not the future. We like to say, "you are the future". No, you are the present. You are not the future of God, you young people are the now of God. He invites you and calls you in your communities and cities to go out and find your grandparents, your elders; to stand up and with them to speak out and realize the dream that the Lord has dreamed for you.

_(Metro Park, Msza Połania)

This part will be the opportunity to give some voice to one young person. I will give example from her testimony.

Karolina, who works at KBO WYD (she was also a delegate of the Polish Episcopate Conference for a pre-synod meeting in Rome) wrote on her blog:

*"After WYD in Rio, the iconic appeal of Pope Francis words "to make a **rumpus**", after Krakow to the language came a good word "get out of the couch ", and how about Panama? It seems to me, even if I look at the frequency of quoting in social media and using it in the context of various events organized in the youth, that the element that was especially remembered by the young and the accompanying priests is a reminder that "we are God's now. "*

Why are these words so important? Why did media and young people pay attention to them? One of the possible answers can be found in the further part of Karolina's testimony:

"I am should able to get in touch with these gifts and secrets I received (during the World Youth Days) and I still get, into the reality that is now given to me. That I would be His

apostle. And I think that with a smile on our face we will be much more effective. As father Leon Knabit (the well-known Polish Benedictine monk) says: " You will not save the world with your face like a cemetery". And we have what to bring into our communities, cities. I do not think there is a pilgrim who will say that it is different.

This summary is, (I do not know if she did it consciously, I did not ask the author of the text about it), for the encouragement of the Pope „In a special way throughout these days, Mary’s fiat has been whispering like a kind of music in the background. She not only believed in God and in his promises as something possible, she believed God himself and dared to say “yes” to taking part in this now of the Lord. She felt she had a mission; she fell in love and that decided everything. May you feel that you have a mission, may you fall in love; the Lord will decide everything.”

The Holy Father warns us not to treat being young as something, that is in the meantime, as a waiting room before tomorrow. He encourages us to build bridges, to revive the church, to transform it. He encourages love and mercy. However, it is hard to suspect the Pope that he encourages young people to be revolutionaries in the wrong sense. The Holy Father does not want this revival made by the young to take place with the break of their roots, detachment from history or tradition. On the contrary, he repeatedly emphasizes that one should reach to the roots to seek advice from the elders, to draw on the history and experience of the Church.

World Youth Day in the international dimension is, as I said earlier, a place of experience. So what did the young people experience in Panama? What they can take away from Panama and transfer to their own country - parish, university, diocese. What delighted young people and what they want to carry further. What is to be a mission?

a) Contents of papal teaching

For time reasons, it is difficult to comprehensively and thoroughly discuss the texts of speeches and describe the gestures of the Holy Father. But there are a few passwords that I will try to point out. This is not a complete list and I will give up specific quotes, quite consciously:

- Mary - a person who, as I mentioned earlier, has led us in a special way over the last three years;
- Church - young, not parallel, but constantly revived, led and stimulated by the Holy Spirit;
- Christ - who unites, which is a dream, his love;
- Building a meeting culture - despite differences, difficulties, etc. Building bridges, not walls;
- True joy and hope;
- The joy of the conversion of the sinner (the subject of rumors, slanders, labels, "you can not do it" - these are topics from a beautiful and somewhat silent meeting with young prisoners in the correctional institution - perhaps because the meeting was closed, but it is an integral part of papal teaching during WYD)
- Accompaniment, protection and compassion (Way of the Cross on Cinta Costera)
- Roots and community
- Synod as a school of listening, accompaniment

All that the Pope spoke about, has become the participation of pilgrims in different dimensions. The presence of the Mother of God was even physically felt. A statue of the Maria la Antigua, a copy of the icon Salus Populi Romani, a statue of Our Lady of Fatima or present in those days in Panama, a particularly important for us Poles, a copy of the icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa. Each pilgrim also received a rosary in his package. Polish pilgrims for host families, left copies of the icon of the Mary of Czestochowa. Of course, these are only external signs, but followed by spiritual sings in each of them. Papal speeches abounded in reference to the Mother of God, and she herself was presented to the young as a model - but not some distant, unattainable. The Mother of God is close to everyone, she wants to accompany everyone, everyone can take an example of it and

follow the path of faith as it went. Everyone can trust as she, God enters into everyone's life, just as he came into her life, everyone is free to say "fiat" as she said.

Church – young, not parallel, but constantly revived, led and stimulated by the Holy Spirit - it was possible to experience it very strongly, especially during the days in the dioceses and when the pilgrims lived during the central events in Panama City with families. Where they could experience a warm welcome in multigenerational families, they were pampered by elder people involved in the reception of pilgrims. In addition, they were able to admire the faith and openness of the Panamanians, their commitment (especially to lay people in the Church), and with what in Poland we sometimes have a problem. In one of the newspapers in Panama, an article entitled "Pilgrims, do not leave!" Appeared. This testifies to the fact that this revival, the new Pentecost, both experienced pilgrims and hosts. In my opinion, it is a beautiful example of exchanging spiritual gifts, building brotherhood, building bridges. This Church, revived by young people and young people, has become a clear example for the whole world - one can live and function differently than the world offers.

We could experience Christ who unites. In Poland, Spanish is relatively unpopular. But young people did not complain about communication problems. They did not complain about cultural differences - even the famous hora Panamena (in an hour does not mean an hour, and being late is so normal that in none of the meetings in which I took part began on time.) Unfortunately, after a month in Panama it also got deep into my blood and it has not really come out yet), for food, even for the temperature that we all teased. Of course, the first days were a shock, but the cordiality, openness and other qualities of the shock canceled. Even the liturgy, so often diametrically opposed to the way the liturgy is celebrated in Poland, has become not a wall but a bridge. Different, but the same. Around the same Christ. Other people - but the same. And friendships, thanks to social media are ongoing, many young people are still in touch through Whatsapp, Instagram, Facebook. (Moreover, it is difficult to underestimate the google translator in the work of evangelization and building communion (and now maintaining the relationship).

The young people took up the challenge to come to the WYD. And this experience of the meeting today continues. What they miss now, is this presence, being with each other, let us add unselfish being with each other, with eyes focused on Christ. Where they could freely talk about faith, about God, about their relationship with him. Where they

could share water or something to eat, experience what the first Christians experienced, who "shared everything".

Experience of real joy – this experience everyone took with them in their heart. World Youth Day is an experience that stays forever. Smile, euphoria, common worship of the Lord, dance, kindness. All these are only external symptoms **that enter into the human heart and transform it, and on the other hand are external expressions of inner joy.** It is safe to say that the young have no problem understanding and implementing the first sentences from Evangelii Gaudium Pope Francis: *The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.*

When we talk about the joy of the meeting, we can not forget about the joy of conversion of the sinner. This experience was also very visible. Especially when in groups there were people who arrived at WYD with their life problems, but also experiencing problems with faith. This community was a place of healing and often bringing to the sacrament of penance and reconciliation.

Teaching of the Holy Father, had a direct impact on many young people. We asked Polish youth to send testimonies to our Office after the World Youth Day in Panama. At the moment there are several dozen of them. Each of them tells us how God works in their lives, how they try to live with God now, what difficulties they had to overcome in order to participate in WYD. Each of these testimonies is a story of a concrete life in which God acts. Many young people, according to the testimonies, made important decisions for themselves at WYD, they recognized them. It is not about any spectacular and medial conversions, but about decisions important in the context of a specific young person. This means that, as I mentioned earlier, the pope, despite his own age - he is already older (from me he is older around 50 years), he feels great and understands young people. If it were not so, his words would fall on a stony ground. They would be another heard sermon, another one conference. Meanwhile, we know it again from the priests, but also the young, after returning from Panama, the young people return to papal speeches, search them on the internet, quote on Facebook, do it themselves and make it available in graphic form. Fortunately, papal texts in written form are available in Polish. Because Polish is no longer the official language of WYD (we will do everything to make it change),

we had to provide and pay for translation ourselves, so that it would be heard during meetings with the Pope. But I testify that it paid off. Thanks to breaking the language barrier, the young people could live these words directly, in communication with the Holy Father, to respond to them. This living word opened hearts.

Archbishop Jose Domingo Ulloa Mendieta, Metropolitan of Panama, very often said that "Panama is a small country with a big heart". During the preparations for WYD, the following questions were very often asked: Why Panama? Why did the Holy Father choose this country - a small one, difficult to go, little known, "at the end of the world", as the host of WYD? I think that in the light of the above considerations, it was, as always, a good and well-recognized decision. This place, those people, the concrete words of the Pope, and earlier the entire process of preparing for this event in Poland, already now brings blessed fruit among the young.

Conclusion.

At the end, I would like to add a few loose thoughts. I treat it as my "now" that God gives me - because who knows, maybe it is the only and last opportunity to say something out loud in such a noble group:

1. Young people want to make the effort to go to SDM, but sometimes you have to explain it to them, light them up, do not cut their wings;
2. Invite priests, seminarians and nuns to the World Youth Day and join in the preparation process. It is the only opportunity for many young people to meet a priest, seminarian or consecrated person. It is also a great tool to show that clergy is ok - we all sleep in the same field, under the same conditions, we eat the same, we are just as sweaty and tired. The young see us as people.
3. Another word about clerics. WYD is a great opportunity to witness to your calling to talk about it, but also to discern it. They are also an opportunity to get to know a given alumni in a difficult situation - because WYD is a pilgrimage, not a trip. In these often difficult conditions it is best to see who is what kind of person.
4. Let's do everything to make us as many as possible in Portugal. Let young people see that there are many of them. It is not about triumphalism, but about the sense of

community. For the Churches still strong, it is an opportunity to listen to brothers and sisters from churches experiencing difficulties. For the weaker Churches - it is a chance for consolation and strengthening in faith. And for all, it is an opportunity to exchange gifts, to build real communion.

5. Let us engage young people, but let us not leave them alone. There is a place for everyone in the group - for a priest, sister, secular leaders. Let us give responsibility to the young and do not underestimate the preparation process, limiting it only to collecting records.

6. And the last point - let us not treat WYD as a pastoral event or a trip (one of many), but as a path that young people in the Church can walk in, living their lives now, learning about the past, and building a better future.

I would like to conclude my speech with the words of Pope Francis, paradoxically from the meeting starting WYD in Panama:

„Dear young friends, the most hope-filled result of this Day will not be a final document, a joint letter or a programme to be carried out. The most hope-filled result of this meeting will be your faces and a prayer. This will give hope: the face with which you return home, the changed heart with which you return home, the prayer you have learned to offer from this changed heart. What will give hope from this encounter will be your faces and your prayer. Each of you will return home with the new strength born of every encounter with others and with the Lord. You will return home filled with the Holy Spirit, so that you can cherish and keep alive the dream that makes us brothers and sisters, and that we must not let grow cold in the heart of our world. Wherever we may be and whatever we may do, we can always look up and say, “Lord, teach me to love as you have loved us”. Will you repeat those words with me? “Lord, teach me to love as you have loved us””