

World Youth Day 2008 - My first time experience in Sydney

Monday 14th July was the day my group was to depart from Melbourne to Sydney to embark on a journey of discovering God during World Youth Day. This was my first time attending World Youth Day. I didn't know what to expect since I had only heard of this event about a year ago when the nuns in the student hostel I was staying in mentioned it. The group I travelled with consisted of a group of people from the Philippines and Indonesia, along with my hostel mates and some priests and nuns. I barely knew them really well before the trip and felt apprehensive about making new friends.

The first day of World Youth Day, Tuesday 15th July, we had to travel to Barangaroo for the opening mass. But first we had one pit stop – St. Mary's Cathedral. It was not easy getting around initially, as we all didn't know Sydney very well and thus it resulted in a lot of walking around trying to find the right bus to get to the destination. We had another problem that surfaced in the afternoon as the group had practically walked for a few hours wondering where was lunch provided, which we later found out



when we arrived at Barangaroo. At St. Mary's Cathedral, there was an amazingly beautiful picture of Mother Mary and baby Jesus. There were so many people there, squeezing around to take photos or to find a spot to kneel down and pray. On the right hand side of the Cathedral was a display of Blessed Pier Giorgio, a young man who lived his life following God closely and helping the homeless. He died young. One Father in my group explained the reason why this young Italian's body was brought all the way to Sydney for us. He was the perfect example for us youths to follow. One thing that really stayed with me was the fact that Pier's favourite prayer was the Hail Mary. All I felt after leaving the Cathedral was a sense of awe and I really wished I was inspired to be like him before I knew about such people. At Barangaroo, opening mass was really grand with a full orchestra and many choirs to sing for us. I had never had this much fun at a mass before. Fireworks in the skies ended my first day as I headed home, taking a bus from central station.

With aching feet, I pushed on the rest of journey during the rest of the days. Catechesis at the Sydney Entertainment Centre was another wonderful experience with singing and praising God and hearing about people's testimonials and experiences with the Holy Spirit and miracles that happened to the man named James Cross. And we really appreciated having chairs to sit on after the first day of sitting on the ground at Barangaroo. On Wednesday, Pope Benedict XVI arrived at Barangaroo and attended mass with us. There was a huge rush of people to see the Pope and many men lifted their friends on their shoulders just to take a snapshot of Pope Benedict XVI. Two of my friends were with me when I got stuck in the front crowd and we were waving madly at Pope Benedict XVI as he passed us to get onto the stage. Sadly we were neither strong enough nor tall enough to get a good photo of him. So we were resigned to taking a photo of him on the big screen.

On Saturday, it was the pilgrimage walk – a 10km walk from the north of the Sydney Harbour Bridge to Randwick Racecourse. We arrived at Randwick with our feet hurting more than any other previous days but our moods were not dampened by the walk – instead we were eager to have lunch. Sitting down on the racecourse, our group began to discuss whether we should spend the night under the stars after mass. In the end most of us returned to our hotel due to the intense chilly weather in the night.

Sunday morning mass was, as usual, grand and Pope Benedict XVI gave a long speech and finally concluded the mass by announcing the location of the next World Youth Day 2011 to be in Madrid, Spain. The Spanish were screaming with glee on the big screen. A sudden sadness began to descend on me. It was almost time to bid farewell to my newly-made friends in the group, from the Philippines, Indonesia, Italy and Albania. The big screen began to flash short videos of the events that had occurred in the past days including the dramatic re-enactment of the Stations of the Cross.

This World Youth Day was a really rewarding experience. I returned to Melbourne with stronger and slightly slimmer legs from all the walking and a strong feeling of the presence of the Holy Spirit. And even though I came down with a cold after the trip, I believe that this little ailment and all the aches and pains will never be equivalent to the sufferings of Jesus, when he died on the Cross for our sins. I also learnt something too – life is a pilgrimage towards God, it's never easy but it's worth it.

Kejre