

Pilgrims' hopes and expectations for World Youth Day 2008

Andrew Singleton
Sociology, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

A paper presented at the
Annual Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion
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Abstract

The "Pilgrims' Progress 2008" (PP08) research project explores the experiences of youthful participants in the Catholic "World Youth Day," held in Sydney, July 2008. This first paper in this group of three begins with a description of the aims and methods of the PP08 project, presents a brief demographic profile of the registered WYD08 pilgrims (highlighting those from Australia, USA, Canada, UK and Asia) and describes the characteristics of the pre-WYD08 survey sample. The paper then examines what the pilgrims hoped to experience during WYD and to gain from their participation. It will present data showing that pilgrims' expectations were varied: some were most looking forward to experiencing the more religious aspects of WYD, like the Masses and catechesis sessions, while others were attracted to the "youth event" elements. The paper also considers the factors which influence pilgrims' hopes and expectations.

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World Youth Day, a youth-oriented Catholic celebration, is the largest recurring youth event in the world. The 10th World Youth Day was held from 15 – 20th July 2008, in Sydney Australia, only the second time a World Youth Day has been held outside Europe or North America. Approximately 223,000 registered Pilgrims from 170 countries participated in a series of week-long events and activities, including catecheses, Masses, the Papal arrival in Sydney, a re-enactment of the Crucifixion, Eucharistic adoration, a “Vocations” Expo (“vocations” here refers to the calling to the priesthood and membership of religious orders), music and dance performances, and art exhibitions. The culmination of the week’s events was the Papal Mass, held at Randwick Racecourse, and celebrated by his Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI. The Mass, according to WYD sources, attracted an estimated 400,000 people, the lowest closing Mass attendance of any WYD, but described by WYD08 administration as “the largest gathering of people in the history of Australia.”

This series of three papers reports on findings from a multi-stage WYD08 research project, “Pilgrims’ Progress 2008.” This first paper explores why young Catholics attended WYD08. It begins with a demographic profile of WYD08 Pilgrims, followed by a description of the aims and methods of the PP08 project. It then examines what the pilgrims hoped to experience during WYD and to gain from their participation. The subsequent papers will examine a series of hypotheses about the impact and character of WYD.

WYD08 Pilgrims

To begin, we describe those who attended WYD08. According to figures produced by WYD08 administration, 223,000 pilgrims registered for the event.

Table 1 on the next page shows the main countries in attendance. Half the pilgrims came from Australia. The next highest number were from the US (9.3% of registered pilgrims), then several European countries (Italy, Spain, Germany, France). 3,658 pilgrims (1.6% of registered pilgrims) came from the Philippines. As we will see in the next paper, religiosity varies considerably by country of residence.

Table 1 Catholic WYD pilgrims country of residence (N and % from each country)

Registered WYD Pilgrims		
Country	N	%
Aust	113,405	50.7%
USA	20,730	9.3%
Italy	16,629	7.4%
Spain	7,569	3.4%
Germany	6,676	3.0%
France	6,048	2.7%
New Zealand	4,217	1.9%
Philippines	3,658	1.6%
Canada	3,201	1.4%
Mexico	2,755	1.2%
United Kingdom	2,435	1.1%
Other	36,251	16.2%
Total	223,000	100%

Source: World Youth 2008 Administration

The Pilgrims Progress 2008 Project

“Pilgrims’ Progress 2008” is a research project being conducted at Australian Catholic University and Monash University, with the support of World Youth Day Administration, focusing on the pilgrims who attended World Youth Day in Sydney in July. The project is studying the experiences of pilgrims before, during and after World Youth Day, seeking to discover “What WYD08 means for its youth participants,” to determine the personal outcomes of the WYD pilgrimage, and to explore the Christian-community-building effect of WYD.

The research team members are Michael Mason and Ruth Webber from Australian Catholic University and Andrew Singleton from Monash University, Australia.

The research has three stages. In stage I of project (covering the period leading up to WYD), interviews and a large-scale survey were conducted to discover what pilgrims hoped for from WYD08, how they prepared for it, and many other aspects of their spirituality and background.

The interviews took place in late 2007 and the first few months of this year. A total of 49 interviews were conducted: 36 interviewees were attending school in 2007, and 13 were post-school age, either in the workforce or at university. 31 were female and 18 were male.

The survey was conducted from May 2nd to 15th on the internet. Participants were sent invitations by WYD administration, inviting them to “Have Your Say” by browsing to a dedicated website and recording their responses. The survey was anonymous – no identifying personal information was asked. 12,275 responses were received.

Stage II of the research project was conducted during the WYD08 week: the team, temporarily expanded to twelve members by the inclusion of some international and local collaborators, traveled to Sydney and attended all of the WYD events. Data were gathered via participant observation (later recorded in field notes), brief interviews, photography, and informal conversations.

One key part of the research strategy during the WYD08 week was for the research team to “embed” themselves with a group of pilgrims. In most cases, these were groups of school-aged youth from schools where the team had conducted Stage I interviews. We accompanied these youth at their daily catecheses, during the Papal arrival, Final Mass, and at other youth festival events. We ate meals with them and traveled with them from location to location. This strategy enabled the team to observe first-hand what pilgrims were doing at different WYD08 events and to have on-going conversations with them about their WYD experience.

Stage II was concluded by the research team attending group debriefing sessions and conducting a further 26 individual interviews and two focus groups with returned pilgrims, many of whom we interviewed in stage I of the research and accompanied during WYD08 week. Findings from stage II are discussed at length in the subsequent papers in this session.

Stage III of the project is another internet survey of registered Pilgrims, to be conducted in November- February. The aim of this stage is better understand the impact WYD08 had on denominational identity, personal religiosity, and civic engagement.

Attention now turns to the pilgrim band and their WYD08 hopes and expectations. The analysis focuses on Catholic English-speaking pilgrims aged 15-35. These youth constituted the majority of WYD08 attenders.

The pilgrim types

WYD is intended to be an international celebration of the Catholic faith and its youth, but WYD appeals to certain Catholic youth and not others. As our data will show, on the whole, the pilgrim group are an elite. Mixed back into the societies from which they come, most would almost disappear among the large number of their fellow-Catholics who did not choose to attend WYD. We know from previous research in many of those countries that the proportion of young Catholics who are highly committed to their faith is quite small (see Smith 2005; Mason, Singleton & Webber 2007). While WYD pilgrims represent the most committed of Catholic youth, there are important differences among the pilgrims, drawn as they are from markedly different societies and coming to WYD at different stages in their lives.

Analysis of our survey data reveal that the English-speaking pilgrims aged 15-35 cluster into 4 groups by level of religious commitment (measured by things such as religious practice, religious belief, commitment to Catholic teaching and strength of their Catholic identity). We call these groups the Devoted, the Involved, the Open and the Social. As we will see below, the names given to each of these groups describes not just their level of religious commitment

but is also indicative of their overall orientation to WYD08, both in terms of what they hoped to experience, and the benefits hoped for from attending.

Briefly, characteristics of these four clusters are as follows:

Devoted. These are highly religious Catholic youth who attend Mass in their parish regularly (often more than once a week) and live the Christian life in their everyday world.

Involved. These youth are also very religious and affirm Catholic teaching and morals. They have a regular involvement in their parish and pray very often, and while less fervent than the Devoted, have a strong faith nonetheless.

Open. These are youth who identify as Catholic, and the majority attend Mass fairly regularly. Their Catholic identity is not as strong as the Involved and Devoted pilgrims. They are also less likely than the two more religious pilgrim types to agree with important church teachings, such as those opposing same-sex marriages and sex before marriage. However, as demonstrated in this paper, many in this group are open to the possibilities of faith development that might result from attending WYD08.

Social. These youth have a looser affiliation with the Catholic Church and lower levels of religious practice – few pray daily. A significant proportion of this group disagree with church teaching opposing same sex marriages and sex before marriage. This group is named Social because their overall orientation to WYD is towards the “fun” and social aspects of the event: meeting people, sightseeing, feeling the “buzz” of being part of a large crowd.

The responses to two survey items serves to illustrate further some of the differences between these four clusters of WYD pilgrims. The first of these is responses to the question: “How influential is your faith in shaping the way you live?” The results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Catholic WYD Pilgrims (aged 15-35): “How influential is your faith in shaping the way you live” by pilgrim types (percent of type)

Influence of faith	Devoted	Involved	Open	Social	Total
Has very little influence in my life	0%	1%	2%	23%	4%
Influences some things but not others	16%	63%	72%	69%	47%
Influences almost everything I do	83%	36%	25%	8%	49%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Pilgrims' Progress 2008 Survey. Note: Percentages in tables throughout this paper may not add to 100 because of rounding, or because small proportions of 'Don't know' and 'No answer' responses have been omitted to simplify the tables.

This table shows that the overwhelming majority of Devoted pilgrims (83 %) feel that their faith is highly influential in shaping the way they live. The majority of the Involved, Open, and Social types affirm that their faith “influences some things but not others.” Almost a quarter of Social pilgrims (23%) feel that their faith has very little influence. Table 3 below shows attendance at Mass.

Table 3. Catholic WYD Pilgrims (aged 15-35): Attendance at Mass by pilgrim types (percent of type)

Attendance at Mass	Devoted	Involved	Open	Social	Total
Not at all/Christmas or Easter	0%	3%	10%	33%	7%
Often, but not every month	1%	3%	7%	12%	4%
Once or twice a month	2%	8%	18%	18%	9%
Every weekend, or more often	97%	86%	66%	37%	80%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Pilgrims' Progress 2008 Survey.

This table again shows the differences between the pilgrim types. Almost all of the Devoted attend Mass weekly or more often (97%), compared to about a third of the Social (37%). Only 66 percent of the Open attend every weekend.

Pilgrim types vary considerably by age and country of residence – differences explored fully in the next paper. However, some age differences are worthy of brief comment. Two thirds of the Social group are aged 15-18, as are almost half of the Open pilgrims. Only a third of Involved pilgrims and a quarter of the Devoted are aged 15-18.

Table 4 shows the relative size of each of the four pilgrim types in our sample. The Social are the smallest group at 13%, the Open and the Involved are of intermediate size, and the Devoted the largest group at 40% of all Catholic, English-speaking pilgrims aged between 15 and 35.

Table 4: Catholic WYD Pilgrims (aged 15-35): Frequency of pilgrim type (N and % of each type)

Pilgrim types		
Pilgrim type	N	%
Devoted	3479	40%
Involved	2189	25%
Open	1890	22%
Social	1166	13%
Total	8724	100%

Source: Pilgrims' Progress 2008 Survey.

What pilgrims looked forward to experiencing at WYD08

In this section I explore what pilgrims were looking forward to experiencing at WYD. Our survey respondents were asked the following: “What are you most looking forward to experiencing at WYD?” The answer options offered were widely varied, from things like “Experiencing the presence of God,” seeing the Pope, participating in the Masses and prayer services, or just “feeling the support of a large crowd of fellow-believers,” and “Making new friends”. Respondents were asked to place the list of possible experiences in rank order. They ranked these items from 1 – what they most hoped to experience, down to 10 – what they were least interested in experiencing.

Our data reveal that some aspects of the up-coming WYD experience appealed to all: seeing the Pope and “feeling part of a large crowd united by shared beliefs” were placed among the highest priorities for all of the pilgrim types. And contrary to a view expressed in many public conversations about WYD, pilgrims did not see WYD as an opportunity to “hook-up” or form a relationship: “Perhaps meeting someone I really like” was the lowest or second lowest priority for all of the pilgrim types.

But there are also important differences between the pilgrims types. These differences between the four spirituality types are illustrated through comparison of the average rank given to two items pilgrims were hoping to experience: “the presence of God” and “having fun, sightseeing, partying.” The average rank for each of the spirituality types is shown in Table 5 below:

**Table 5. Catholic WYD Pilgrims (aged 15-35):
‘What are you most looking forward to experiencing at WYD?’
by pilgrim type (average ranks)**

Looking forward to:	Pilgrim type: Average rank for each item				
	Devoted	Involved	Open	Social	All
Experiencing the presence of God	3	3	4	6	4
Having fun, sightseeing, partying	8	7	6	5	7

Source: Pilgrims' Progress 2008 Survey.

One is the highest possible rank, so when the Devoted and Involved give an average rank of 3 to “Experiencing the presence of God,” they are putting it much closer to their “number one priority” than the Social group, who rank it 6. In contrast, the Social group rank having fun, partying and sightseeing as a higher priority than either the Involved and Devoted.

Consistent with what is shown in Table 4, the Devoted ranked highest the religious, devotional and teaching aspects of WYD: the three things they were most looking forward to experiencing were the presence of God, seeing the Pope and the Masses and prayer services.

In contrast, the Social group have an orientation to WYD that is mainly about “being there” at a mass youth event, and all the things that come with this: the top four things they hoped to experience were the “buzz” of the youth event, “making new friends,” “feeling part of a large crowd united by shared beliefs,” and “having fun, sightseeing, partying.” For the Social pilgrims, WYD08 is mainly about feeling the sheer rush of gathering with so many others,

and making friends with people from around the world. The religious elements were a lower priority for them.

The Open and Involved fit in between the particular priorities of Social and Devoted pilgrims. Their overall orientation was towards some of the religious elements of WYD, such as hoping to experience the presence of God and see the Pope, but they wanted these religious experiences to happen in the company of other like-minded youth, and come about through sharing about faith with other youth and seeing the Pope, rather than through the catecheses, the Masses and prayer services.

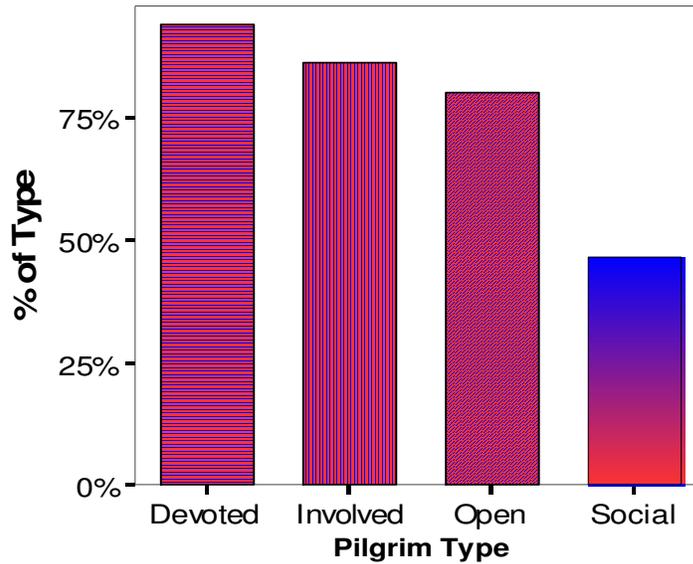
Benefits hoped for from WYD08

Another key set of questions we asked of survey respondents were about the benefits they hoped for as a result of attending WYD08. The respondents were asked 'When World Youth Day is all over, what benefits do you hope for as a result of attending?' Then followed a list of benefits from which they could select any they felt were applicable to them. The benefits were:

- *Getting your faith and your life more together: living what you believe;*
- *A closer relationship with God, with Jesus;*
- *A deeper understanding of Catholic beliefs and moral teachings;*
- *A fuller acceptance of these beliefs and moral teachings;*
- *A stronger sense of Catholic identity;*
- *A greater commitment to social justice;*
- *Feeling the energy to get more involved in your parish.*

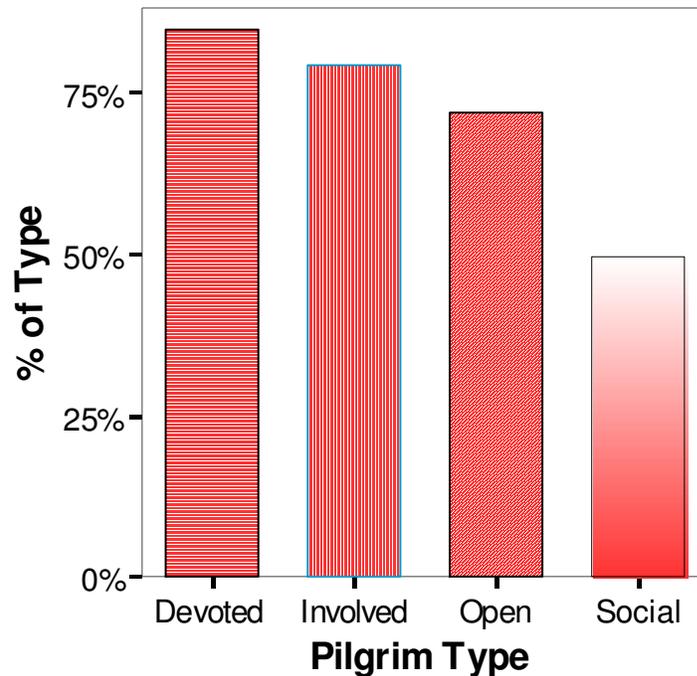
Time does not permit a full analysis of the responses to these items, but a particular pattern emerges from pilgrims' answers to all of these items. The Devoted are most hopeful of religious outcomes from WYD, the Social the least, with the large majority of Involved and Open well disposed to religious outcomes from WYD08. To illustrate, Figure 1 shows the percentage of each type who hoped that attending WYD would result in a "closer relationship with God/ with Jesus."

Figure 1: Catholic WYD Pilgrims (aged 15-35): WYD Benefits hoped for: 'A closer relationship with God/ with Jesus' by pilgrim type (% of type)



This figure shows that 94 % of the Devoted Catholic youth hoped that attending WYD08 would engender a closer relationship with God/with Jesus, compared to 86% of the Involved, 80% of the Open and less than half of the Social – just 47%. A similar pattern is revealed in Figure 2 below, which shows the percent of each type who hoped that attending WYD would result in “a stronger sense of Catholic identity.”

Figure 2: Catholic WYD Pilgrims (aged 15-35): WYD Benefits hoped for: 'A stronger sense of Catholic identity' by pilgrim type (% of type)



The overwhelming majority of Devoted (85%), Involved (79 %) and Open (72 %) pilgrims hoped for this particular benefit, whereas only half the Social group (50%) were hoping to develop a stronger sense of Catholic identity.

Summarizing the differences between the pilgrim types, we have seen that the Devoted are enthusiastic about the religious elements of WYD, and hope for every benefit possible for the growth of their faith – a faith that is already strong and committed. The Involved are seeking to experience the religious aspects of the event, are quite enthusiastic about any major change in their lives as a result of it, but are drawn to the event mainly because it brings together like-minded Catholic youth from around the world, and offers a chance to see the Pope.

The Open pilgrims are similar in these ways to the Involved, perhaps drawn a little more by the social elements and a little less by the religious parts of WYD. As the name of this group suggests, they are open to further faith development. Even though they prioritized experiences such as “making new friends” “the buzz of being part of a large youth event” slightly above things like Masses and prayer services, the overwhelming majority sought benefits to their faith such as those items discussed above, plus others, such as: “getting their faith and life more together,” (80% of Open pilgrims hoped for this benefit) and “a deeper understanding of Catholic beliefs and moral teachings.” (69%). Perhaps the one area they are less keen on post WYD was actually getting more involved in their parish – only 57% nominated this as a benefit hoped for.

The Social want to experience the excitement of the event and make new friends, and are not much interested in strengthening either their knowledge of their faith nor their involvement in the Church.

Influences on pilgrims' hopes and expectations

What influences a pilgrims' hopes and expectations for WYD08? For the most part, pilgrims' hopes and expectations for WYD08 are consistent with their religious orientation. As we saw in the previous section, the most religious are most drawn to the religious aspects of the event, the less religious to the "youth culture" components. In the next paper, my colleague Michael Mason explores more fully the spiritual background of each type and how this is related to age and country of origin.

Other factors are related to pilgrims' hopes and experiences. One of these is attendance at a previous WYD. Fifteen percent of those surveyed had been to a previous WYD. The group most likely to have done so are the Devoted, 21% of whom have been to a WYD, compared to 12% of the Involved, 10% of the Open and 8% of the Social. We asked past pilgrims which WYDs they had attended. Most had only been to one – Cologne in 2005, although a substantial proportion had been to Rome in 2000. (We had respondents from every WYD except the first, Buenos Aires 1987.)

How does having already made a WYD pilgrimage condition a pilgrim's hopes and expectations for WYD08? Did those who had fun and enjoyed the sightseeing at a previous WYD want the same experiences at WYD08, or did they go to Sydney hoping to experience something else? Do those who have already seen the Pope, say at Cologne WYD in 2005, rate seeing him a lower priority second time around?

We asked past pilgrims to reflect back on the most recent WYD they had attended by asking them "which experiences were the most valuable?" The answer options included: "Experiencing the presence of God", "Seeing the Pope", "Sharing about faith with other young people", "the Masses and prayer services" and "Making new friends." Respondents were asked to place the list of experiences in rank order.

Analysis reveals that the experiences that were most valuable last time are related strongly to what pilgrims looked forward to experiencing at WYD08. In other words, whatever caused the "buzz," for them last time, be that religious or social, was similar to what was being sought in Sydney. For example, there is a strong correlation between having found the fun, sightseeing and partying the most valuable thing at the most recent WYD attended and looking forward to having fun at WYD08.¹ Similarly, having experienced the presence of God at the previous WYD correlates strongly with looking forward to experiencing God's presence again at WYD08.² And it appears that the prospect of seeing the Pope more than once has great appeal. Having seen the Pope at a previous WYD is strongly correlated with wanting to see the Pope again in Sydney.³ Past pilgrims, it seems, went to WYD seeking to experience more of whatever they got last time.

Are past pilgrims hoping for different benefits resulting from their second pilgrimage? Overwhelmingly, past pilgrims seek the same benefits as experienced last time around. For

¹ ($r = .621$, $n = 1315$, $p < .000$).

² ($r = .621$, $n = 1326$, $p < .000$).

³ ($r = .694$, $n = 1326$, $p < .000$).

example, 93% of past pilgrims who felt they became closer to God as a result of attending the last WYD sought this benefit this time around. In like manner, 83% of those who felt that attending a WYD strengthen their Catholic identity sought this benefit again.

The next two papers will examine more closely the impact of WYD.

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