Survey of World Youth Day pilgrims finds out who went and why

The project

‘Pilgrims’ Progress 2008’ is a research project being conducted at Australian Catholic University, with the support of World Youth Day Administration, focussing 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, partly to provide feedback to those who organised the event, and also to build an understanding of the spirituality of the pilgrims, as a foundation on which improved ministry to them and to other Catholic young people can be constructed.

The research team – Rev. Dr. Michael Mason CSsR and Professor Ruth Webber from Australian Catholic University and Dr. Andrew Singleton from Monash University, previously worked together over the period 2003-2007 on a study of the spirituality of Generation Y, published as The Spirit of Generation Y (Melbourne: Garratt) in mid-2007.

In Stage I of the World Youth Day research 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. Limitations of time and funding restricted the scope of the project to those registered for English-language catechesis at WYD. These were about two-thirds of attenders and came from a very wide range of countries. For many of them, English was a second or third language.

The personal interviews took place in late 2007 and the first few months of this year with pilgrims from both school and post-school age groups.

The survey

The survey was conducted from May 2nd to 15th on the internet. It was designed by the ACU research team, and hosted on a specialised website run by an independent survey organisation. All pilgrims who had registered as English-speaking by the end of April were sent invitations by WYD administration, inviting them to ‘Have Your Say’ by browsing to the website and recording their responses. It turned out that a high proportion of the pilgrims did not register until after this date, and it was estimated that some WYD events, notably the Papal Mass, were attended not only by the 223,000 registered pilgrims, but by as many again who were not registered. If those who registered later, and those who attended but did not register, were markedly different from the earlier registrants, the survey findings will not apply to them. A later survey is planned that will sample all registrants – early and late; but the much larger crowds attending some of the special events are beyond the scope of the project.

The survey was anonymous – no identifying personal information was asked. At the end of the survey, some who volunteered to be contacted during or after WYD for an interview provided their first names and phone numbers.

There were 12,275 responses to the internet survey. Dr. Mason commented that this was a very high response rate, and showed the great goodwill and cooperativeness of the pilgrims. However, it was not always easy to contact them. “Many young people today don’t use email much, or don’t check their email very often” Dr. Mason explained. “They prefer to use mobile phones, SMS, and social networking sites like MySpace. We got responses from 78% of those we did succeed in contacting, which was an outstanding result – an unusually high level of response.”
The survey strongly confirmed the impression that the team had derived from the lengthy interviews conducted earlier: the pilgrims were not just a random collection of younger Catholics; they were special; they took some trouble to get to this gathering; they wanted to be there.

The majority of pilgrims expressed a strong faith. And, of those who were not yet at that point, many seemed to be Seekers, like the centurion in the Gospel who went looking for Jesus. When asked if he believed in Him, he replied: ‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief’.

One purpose of the survey was to understand where pilgrims were coming from – not geographically but spiritually. Of special interest was what pilgrims hoped to experience at WYD, and what benefits for their own lives they hoped to take away from it.

The survey revealed that what pilgrims most wanted at WYD was a spiritual experience, and in that context, to see and listen to the Holy Father. For the vast majority of pilgrims, celebrating faith in Eucharist and prayer, learning about faith, sharing faith with other young people, were the experiences they looked forward to, well ahead of the social opportunities the occasion also offered.

Their hopes for what they would gain from WYD were in the same vein: most of all, they said they wanted a closer relationship with God and Jesus, they wanted to really live what they believe, and to have a stronger sense of what it means to be Catholic.

What preparatory activities had people actually engaged in? Very large numbers had seen a DVD on WYD. And a surprisingly high proportion had talked to someone who had already been to a WYD. Likewise, most had attended some kind of information session at school or in their parish. The Journey of the Cross and Icon was still in progress at the time of the survey – many had been to ceremonies welcoming these sacred symbols to their school or parish. Many also took part in fundraising or promotional activities.

The survey asked pilgrims what other factors, apart from their own attraction to the idea, helped them decide to go to WYD. Having friends who were going was a big factor for everyone; also receiving encouragement from others – for younger pilgrims, this included parents and teachers. After these, the most powerful influence was talking personally to someone who had attended a previous WYD. Seeing a DVD also had an impact.

Naturally, there was a very wide range of individual differences between pilgrims. They came from different backgrounds, and had different hopes and expectations for WYD. However, despite all these individual differences, there were two large groups among the pilgrims whose members had a good deal in common.

The first group, the larger of the two, contained almost two-thirds of the (English-speaking) Catholics in WYD’s target age-range of 15-35. The groups overlapped in age, but this first group were a little older. Most were in their twenties; so they were in tertiary education, working, or looking for employment; some in their upper twenties were married. They set the tone for the majority attitude towards WYD. They were making sacrifices to take a week out to come to WYD, and they were not messing around. Their spirituality was very full-on, and so was their approach to WYD: they saw it as sacred time.

The second group, one-third of the total, were younger; most of them aged 15-18, still in high school, the rest of this group were under 25. Because Australia was the host country this time, and the event was far more accessible to Australians than anyone else, a lot of school-age Australians
were attending WYD; so this group contained a particularly large share of Aussies. And since it was relatively inexpensive and easy to attend, and many received financial assistance from their parents or schools, their decision to attend did not require the same high level of motivation as for the older group and those from overseas.

Whereas the older group were very focussed on spiritual values, by contrast, the younger group were unabashedly attracted to all the aspects of WYD which naturally appeal to younger people: they loved the adventure of it: the excitement of being part of a huge crowd of youth, travelling to a spectacular city, making new friends, celebrating. It might be a religious occasion, but it had lots of other appeal – it was going to be fun!

What made these two groups different? They were largely on opposite sides of age 19, a big divide. Turning 19 these days in the developed world was like arriving at a station where everyone has to change trains. It’s a life-stage transition: out of school, a medium-sized institution, with its routines and restrictions and the friendship groups that have grown together during the high school years, and into a tertiary institution (usually large) or the workforce. And accompanying these changes, partly responding to them and partly precipitating them, are developmental changes in the person – around this time the adolescent begins to become the ‘emerging adult’. The group in their early to mid-twenties have more stable friendship patterns, whereas for the younger, friendship groups also are in transition -- old groups are breaking up and new ones forming. Their dependence on friends makes them especially interested in the opportunities for social interaction offered by WYD.

That’s not to say that this younger group were uninterested in the spiritual side of the occasion; most were open to that, but clearly, it was not as high a priority for them as for the older group. At first sight, then, it could have seemed as if the younger group of pilgrims were there mainly for the fun. However, when you dug a little deeper, that impression quickly disappeared. The faith and spiritual practice of most of the younger group were actually very strong.

“The most surprising finding from the survey so far” said Fr. Mason, “was the strength of the younger group’s spirituality. We’d got the impression from previous research, and from some interviews, that quite a few pilgrims, especially the younger ones, were not much involved with their local church. However that seemed to be the case with only about a quarter of the younger group. Nearly half of them were regular church attenders, had a strong faith and a firm sense of Catholic identity. They were a lot more involved in the life of faith than was typical for Catholics their age. What the survey told us was that underneath the youthful exuberance, most of them had a core of solid commitment.”

The research team will be analysing the data from the survey for quite some time yet.

**Further stages of the project**

Meanwhile, Stage II of the research project has also been completed: the team, temporarily expanded to twelve members by the inclusion of some international and local collaborators, travelled to Sydney and attended all kinds of WYD events, with their eyes and ears open. It turned out to be quite difficult to conduct interviews at any real depth with pilgrims during the week, but the team gathered a mass of data from observation and informal conversations. They concluded this phase by attending debriefing sessions with groups who had returned home and conducting individual interviews, face-to-face or by phone, with returned pilgrims, so as to check their observations against pilgrims’ accounts of their own experience.
Finally, in Stage III of the project, when Catholic life has returned to a more normal level of intensity, those who attended will be invited to share their reflections on their experiences via a second internet survey. This survey will sample all the pilgrims registered for English-language catechesis, including those who registered too late to be included in the pre-WYD survey.

The results of the study will be published in the usual ways: on the project website, in media reports, conference papers, journal articles, and later in book form, and will be available to all who are interested. Results will be used to help improve ministries to young people, and will be passed on to organising bodies in the host countries where future World Youth Days are to be held.

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