

A spirituality on the move The results of a survey among Italian participants in WYD in Rome and Toronto

*Rev. Paolo Giulietti
Head of Youth Ministry Services, Italian Bishops' Conference*

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I. Introduction to the survey

The decision to carry out a survey among the young Italians participating in WYD was taken by the organising committee after the huge gathering at Tor Vergata. The main question concerned the extent to which this large number of participants was representative of the world of youth.

Secondly, we wanted to know what effect their experience in Rome would have on everyday life. The principle objective: to identify ways of better integrating the event into the normal processes of youth ministry. The questionnaire was also sent to the participants in WYD 2002 on the express wish of the Italian Bishops' Conference in order to give diachronic insight to the results from WYD 2000.

The two parts of the undertaking were carried out in separate ways. The "veterans" of Tor Vergata were contacted after they returned home and were interviewed in a more structured way:

1. questionnaire with multiple-choice responses;
2. semi-structured interviews;
3. focus groups (of youth and of leaders)[1].

This was clearly a long effort, and it was carried out some time after the exuberance of the event, from summer 2001 until winter 2002. The young people who went to Toronto, on the other hand, were interviewed in Canada during the few days immediately following the conclusion of the event by means of a multiple-choice response questionnaire[2].

The results of the survey were printed in book form and are "commented" in a videocassette. We are sorry to say they are only available in Italian[3].

2. WYD: now an "ordinary" event

It is not possible to give a full account of the survey in such a short time, nor to evaluate the interesting results. Besides, I realise that young Italians do not represent the other 140 plus countries that participated in WYD. I have tried to leave out the elements that mainly reflect our cultural and ecclesial context so that more emphasis can be given to the points that I think we all share. I apologise in advance if I have not succeeded.

I shall try to highlight some of the more interesting conclusions that have possible implications for pastoral ministry. It will be a partial view and very specific, but I do not think it will displease Professor Garelli who combines scientific rigour with concern for education in the faith of young people.

One initial consideration is in order. World Youth Days cannot be considered as "extraordinary" events. If they were, the data and reflections that follow would refer only to a "niche" event of interest to the media but of little influence on pastoral work. How do the 20,000 Italian youngsters who went to Toronto represent the 12 million adolescents and youth of Italy?[4] How does a week-long event compare with over one hundred that take place between WYDs? This

survey might turn out to be like other studies on specific aspects of the world of youth: they are useful in that they reveal certain tendencies, but none of us would dream of formulating our work with young people in terms of these results.

However, WYDs are a different case. They have become fixed stages in the path the Church has outlined for youth. We have become aware of that in Italy, not only because of the massive attendance at WYD in Rome, but also because of the phenomenon (so far undocumented) of the thousands of young people who met last summer in different places to celebrate their "own" virtual WYD. This was of no less significance than the gathering with the Pope at Downsview Park. And what can we say about the 8,000 and more daily hits to the "Toronto live" section on the website www.gmg2002.it? On the whole, young Italians show us that WYD is not an optional extra. It is a fundamental stage on their Christian journey.

This is precisely the first significant piece of data that emerges from our survey: World Youth Day taps into needs and demands that are not at all marginal or secondary and that do not refer to a type of youth that is "different" from the others. In fact, the participants in the world events, even if they make up the "privileged bracket" of the Catholic world[5], demonstrate the typical traits of today's youth culture and constitute a reality that is by no means homogeneous.

Knowing something about the participants in Rome and Toronto is therefore a key to understanding what youth want from religion and a chance to see that "galaxy in motion" which aptly describes the religious dimension of young people at the start of the third millennium. This is a very interesting topic, both for the formulation of a correct "WYD pastoral ministry" and in order to gauge what the Christian community can offer the world of youth. It is along the lines of these two dimensions that I wish to base my short intervention.

3. WYD youth

The survey devotes particular attention to the religious sensitivities of the young participants in Rome and Toronto. The title of the book demonstrates an awareness of the basic characteristics of the religious dimension of young people - observed in the WYD youth - that tend towards the model "of the one who searches and of the pilgrim, of those who are on a journey and hence cannot be said to have reached their goal; that tend to consider each experience as a stage in their own journey in faith. The choice of this model is emblematic of piety in motion that makes exterior mobility reflect that which is going on within. They are in search of new religious experiences as opportunities to enrich their life of faith... [...]. Young people also admit that their faith is weak, and they interpret it more as a process and movement than as a conquest already achieved"[6].

Within the framework of this religious sensitivity, the survey has identified four "styles" of piety: "the very faithful", "the searchers", "the moderates", and "those in stand by". I will not describe each of these here, but they do refute the idea of substantial homogeneity among WYD participants and give a much clearer vision that is very relevant to youth ministry. It is enough to think that the last of the identified "styles" - representing one sixth of the total number - is characterised by a perceptible distance being kept from the aspects that qualify as active piety[7].

4. WYD "ordinary pastoral ministry"

Right from the beginning, WYDs have tried to keep in touch with "ordinary pastoral ministry"[8]. They actually came about with the declared intention of revitalising the relationship between the Church and the world of youth at the normal everyday level in time and space[9]. Throughout these seventeen years this aim has been modified and "refined", but it is still clearly apparent from several points of view:

- a) the missionary approach with respect to the host country and city, and they themselves use this event to relaunch their own youth ministry;
- b) the care to bring the challenges of today into the themes that are addressed in order to insert new insights and content into ordinary pastoral ministry;

c) the endeavour to use new language - that is also valid outside the scope of the event - in order to communicate with the world of youth.

WYD is not without its limitations, but it does not seem right to claim that these issues are the cause of the difficulty in placing WYD in the context of youth ministry. I would see the need to make a fundamental advance in quality: to approach WYD with the same planning mentality with which we deal with educational activities. To bring this about, certain areas need particular care, as emphasised in the survey:

1. the situation regarding preparation and motivation is very unstable. It has therefore become important to "select" and encourage participants, to plan the follow up and to have a serious path of preparation that "raises the standards" of the requirements;
2. the survey has also shown clearly that young people can appreciate the central dimensions of the event (spiritual and instructional), but it has also shown that a number of people find it hard to do this well. It is therefore essential to make intelligent and careful use (based on a plan as mentioned above) of the many opportunities offered by WYD.
3. the survey shows that almost half of the participants have a weak relationship with faith and the Church. It is therefore important to stimulate a consciously missionary participation, even through appropriate initiatives "in loco" so that each one can feel called by name and faith can be strengthened through the commitment of joyful witness.

Unless these areas are attended to, it is difficult to imagine that WYD can be of consequence to "ordinary pastoral ministry".

5. Youth ministry at the level of WYD

WYD is undoubtedly an extremely positive experience of youth ministry. The survey shows that the WYD youth are the "'privileged bracket' of catholic youth, [...] nonetheless, it still happens that there are different elements within this group"[10]. This shows that the success of the event cannot be attributed to the elitist nature of the portion of the youth world who go there. World Youth Days thus make a loud call on "ordinary pastoral ministry".

According to some of those interviewed, given that it is not possible to reproduce WYD at a local level, the event gives rise to enthusiasm and energy that can be exhausted when the youth come back into contact with daily life and the local Church. In addition to the many young people who grew in faith in Toronto and Rome, there are many boys and girls for whom WYD was a nice event but of transitory success, to the consequent frustration of diocesan and parochial leaders. Likewise, one often hears disappointed people say that they had hoped for an improvement in their youth ministry, especially after WYD in Rome, but they only found exhaustion.

This is serious, and we cannot avoid the matter through uncritical acceptance and attempts at imitation, nor by refusing all that comes from outside. We must ask ourselves about the positive dynamics that WYD has introduced and how they can be brought into our regular events.

From this point of view, the survey helps us to identify the positive reactions young people have to WYD:

- with a critical and selective attitude regarding Christian belonging, the WYD experience leads to a positive judgment of the Christian community. They see the closeness and care given to the needs and languages of the youth (care that is embodied in the Pope, and also in the priests and, to a lesser extend, in the bishops);
- with little "religious memory" so far, WYDs become real milestones with which to record one's Christian experience;
- with the sense of isolation and marginalisation that comes in daily life, WYD gives an opportunity to experience the euphoria of sharing with a huge number of young people the experiences of a life of faith in a city they find welcoming and sympathetic;
- with the temptation towards a "self-made" and "intimist" spirituality, WYD yet again puts forward the centrality of the Word of God and reawakens the need for instruction in the contents of faith;

- with the risk of weak missionary spirit in the pluralistic and eirenic atmosphere in which many young people are immersed, WYD reawakens the demands of mission within and beyond the confines of the Christian community.

In short, without denying the basic dimension of piety in young people, it seems that WYD provides stimuli and correctives that bring about a satisfactory integration of faith and life.

At this point, we come to the problem of how "ordinary youth ministry" can embrace all that is positive in WYD. Many things could be proposed. I shall suggest just approaches.

The first approach is to involve the entire Christian community. WYD in Canada, perhaps more than the one in Rome[11], directed the attention of the home Church to the young people, and also that of the local communities in the host country (through twinning), of parishes, families, associations and institutions in Toronto. The young people interviewed were very aware of the involvement of the parishes, the attention of the Pope and the closeness of other figures in the Church. They had the experience of being "pastoral priority". This, unfortunately, too often remains at the level of verbalisation.

I believe that this scale of investment, one that reflects quite a positive estimation of the world of youth, will be the first stimulus to adopt with a view to continuity. When youth ministry becomes a real priority in the Christian community, when adults (family, priests, bishops...) are close to young people and trust them, the youth will respond enthusiastically. We need this path to be taken in every diocese and parish and to go beyond the mentality of delegating and of superficiality so that the newer generations can be prime movers. When enthusiasm wanes and they give it all up when they return, the cause often lies in the closed doors they find at home that were wide open elsewhere.

A second approach, complementary to the first, is in relation to the many "languages" used by WYD to speak to the hearts of young people. Toronto continued to develop this Multimedia approach. We think of the televised Way of the Cross, and of the significance of the internet and television. We also think of the way different kinds of interpersonal encounters were offered (in Toronto the possibility to serve the poor was introduced). The wealth of means of communication matches the variety of participants and offers each one the possibility of finding the Christian message at his/her level. No one feels excluded at WYD[12].

The survey informs us that youth ministry must do no less than to hasten along the same path. In a complex society there is a need to learn to communicate along different channels and to use various kinds of language, and to learn to consciously orient them towards evangelisation. We can no longer postpone the acquisition of communication skills. We cannot do without a pastoral plan that outlines itineraries, styles, ways of coming together and languages even if quite broad-based, though placed in the frame of a single project.

The final approach concerns the need to present a Christianity of wide horizons and high standards. Toronto was a "world" day more than any of the previous WYDs. It gathered youth from 180 countries in the most multiethnic city on the globe at a critical time in the history of humanity. Moreover, the Canadian WYD was deliberately placed in the post-jubilee period, strongly embracing the call to a pastoral ministry directed towards holiness and responding to the real need for spirituality and instruction[13]. Besides, Toronto 2002 joined these two dimensions when the Pope called young people to be the "new builders" of a civilisation of love: to be saints - as part of a global process of renewal of society.

It is not difficult to understand how much this is in tune with the hearts of the young, so often pulled down to low level projects, by that sort of "lack of oxygen" which is one of the results of the ideology crisis. It is not difficult, however, to perceive the risk of going no further than verbalising plans or of fleeting fervour, if the trouble is not taken to indicate practical routine courses of action that combine gradualism with efficiency. In this sense, "to think globally and act locally" is a necessary logic, *mutatis mutandis*, both as regards the path to holiness as well as in relation to the great social, cultural and economic themes.

From this point of view, Toronto has given some good insights (above all, in my opinion, the opportunity to form relationships as a way of clarifying problems and to meet companions on the journey[14]), but the baton is clearly passing to "ordinary pastoral ministry". To be at "world" level and "on a high" in our daily undertakings is quite a challenge. This is to give rise to a generation of "new builders", something we are acutely aware that we need very much.

6. Conclusion

In almost twenty years the WYDs have grown, always adapting and improving until they have become quite an incisive pastoral instrument. This is due to their capacity to note and interpret the changes happening in a world of youth that is in a state of continuous transformation. In this sense they have been very important for youth ministry because they have been able to direct and caution. Likewise, the successful paths followed by the local Churches and lay gatherings have given much to World Youth Day.

I hope that this talk, in spite of the limitations announced at the start, can be a contribution to this positive osmosis.

[1] The surveys involved 600 young people from the regions of Piemonte, Lombardia, Lazio and Puglia; 40 semi-structured interviews were carried out and there were 13 focus groups (5 with young people and 8 with leaders).

[2] Over 1,800 questionnaires were distributed. These were similar to those given to the participants in WYD in Rome (integrating references to the previous WYD and some experiences pertaining specifically to Canada).

[3] The publication: F. Garelli - R. Ferrero Camoletto (ed.), *Una spiritualità in movimento. Le Giornate Mondiali della Gioventù, da Roma a Toronto*, Messaggero Publishers, Padua 2003. The videocassette: recorded by A. Belluco, *Giovani e fede oggi. Spiritualità in movimento*, Audiovideo Messaggero, Padua 2003.

[4] Source: ISTAT, *Popolazione e statistiche demografiche*. Official site www.istat.it.

[5] The young Italians who participate in WYD are mainly those associated at the grass roots level, that is, groups connected to the local churches (cf. pp. 255-256)

[6] pp 256-257

[7] cf. pp. 233-237

[8] I use the expression reluctantly because of the way in which it is exploited and used in the narrow sense where "extraordinary" tends to mean excessive and superfluous, and hence, useless or harmful.

[9] "World Youth Day is the Church's Day for youth and with youth. This is not meant to be an alternative to ordinary youth ministry, often carried out with great sacrifice and self-denial. It is intended, rather, to consolidate this work by offering new incentives for commitment, objectives which demand ever greater involvement and participation. While aiming to foster greater fervour in apostolate among young people, there is absolutely no intention of isolating them from the rest of the community, but rather of making them the protagonists of an apostolate which will spread to the other age groups and situations of life in the ambit of the 'new evangelization'". (John Paul II, Letter to Cardinal Eduardo Francisco Pironio on the occasion of the seminar on world youth days organized in Czestochowa, 8 May 1996, n.3).

[10] pp. 224-225

[11] cf. p. 186

[12] On the communication styles of WYD in Toronto cf. p. 180

[13] "The youth of Toronto, in synthesis, have confirmed the validity of the WYD event, but at Toronto they seem to have given it a more personal and reflective interpretation, emphasising the spiritual dimension more than human encounters" (p. 170). also cf pp. 189-190.

[14] Contact with Canada was not limited to a visiting tour [...], but consisted of opportunities to observe and discover an environment with its own social and cultural characteristics. [...] "youth going there went in search of more than emotions and new experiences, but for meaningful encounters and human enrichment" (p. 176).