

WYD, youth ministry and vocations

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My responsibilities at the Pontifical Council for the Laity include the following up of preparations for World Youth Day and keeping abreast of issues related to youth ministry. This brings me to look at two specific aspects:

1. How does WYD contribute to the development of vocations?
2. In what way can we direct youth ministry so that it can foster the growth of vocations?

WYD is fertile territory for calls to vocation

Benedict XVI said on his return from WYD in Cologne:

I would like here to recall a special Meeting, my encounter with the seminarians, young men called to a more radical and personal following of Christ, Teacher and Pastor. I wanted a specific moment to be devoted to them, also to highlight the vocational dimension typical of World Youth Days. In the past 20 years, many vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life have been born precisely during the World Youth Days, privileged occasions when the Holy Spirit makes his call forcefully heard. (General Audience, 24 August 2005)

We know from experience that WYD has given rise to wonderfully dynamic youth ministry and, furthermore, it has greatly contributed to the awakening of many priestly and religious vocations. We become aware of this if we look at the seminaries in countries that have hosted WYD.

How has WYD been able to make this great contribution in the area of vocations? There are several reasons.

WYD is basically an epiphany of God and the Church. John Paul II defined WYD as a time of encounter with Christ. The whole pastoral plan of WYD is directed towards this encounter through catechesis, eucharistic celebrations, an invitation to the sacrament of reconciliation, eucharistic adoration and gatherings of youth from many countries, all in a climate of joy and communion. This is not simply a “flash in the pan”, as some have claimed. It all takes place as part of a pilgrimage that begins with spiritual preparation throughout the preceding year. The message addressed by the Holy Father to youth forms part of that preparation and youth are encouraged to meditate upon it. The days in the diocese just before the event in the WYD host city is the next step in that preparation. Then WYD concludes with the youth being sent out on mission. Just as the disciples met Jesus on the road to Emmaus, young people can meet with the risen Lord and return home to their Christian communities and give witness. We know what impact WYD has had: it brings new dynamism to groups of young people in chaplaincies, movements and parishes, and gives them new momentum.

I would like to emphasise two particularly significant aspects of so many young people's initial spiritual experience at WYD. Some years ago, at Cologne 2005, eucharistic adoration began to have a more important place in the programme in order to respond to a generation of youth who define themselves as "a eucharistic generation". Confessions too have had astonishing "success". These young people experience being loved by God who is present through the eucharistic sacrifice, and of being saved through God's forgiveness. These are two foundations of Christian life, and also of every vocation. Is it not true that priests and consecrated people are witnesses of Mercy and instruments of salvation?

WYD has proved to be firmly centred on the paschal mystery. The symbol of WYD is the Cross that John Paul II gave to young people at the end of the jubilee year of the Redemption 1983-1984. That cross prepares the way for WYD by going on pilgrimage throughout the host country. Then it takes central place at WYD, especially during the Friday Way of the Cross. When summing up the experience of WYD in Sydney, Benedict XVI said:

First of all, it has to be realized that World Youth Days do not consist only of the one week when they are brought to the attention of the world. They are preceded by a long process of preparation both practical and spiritual. The Cross, accompanied by the icon of the Mother of the Lord, goes on pilgrimage to many countries. [...] The solemn World Youth Days are nothing if not the culmination of a long process in which the young people turn to one another and then, together, turn to Christ. In Australia it was not by chance that the Way of the Cross, winding through the city, became the high point of those days. Once again, it summed up everything that had occurred in previous years, while pointing to the One who gathers us together: to that God who loves us all the way to the Cross. (Address to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2008)

We know that there are close bonds between the priestly vocation and the mystery of the Cross. When the Cross is at the centre of pastoral ministry, it should not surprise us that priestly vocations are born. Some young priests testify to the importance of the WYD Cross on their vocational journey. We can say that vocations are born at the foot of that Cross.

There is another aspect of WYD that contributes to its role in inspiring vocations: the service dimension. The organisation of WYD depends largely on young people taking up responsibility. Many of these are leaders in the dioceses and movements. Many are volunteers who give weeks or months of their time to the WYD services of welcoming, arranging, security, translations and liturgy. There were 22,500 international volunteers in Madrid. Young people are obviously attracted to taking responsibility and giving their time to the Church.

In this context, the pope and bishops make an explicit call to vocations. The Holy Father was scheduled to do this during the vigil, but he could not deliver that address because of the storm. The text, which young people could read later, is as follows:

The Lord calls many people to marriage, in which a man and a woman, in becoming one flesh (cf. Gen 2:24), find fulfilment in a profound life of communion. [...] Christ calls others to follow him more closely in the priesthood or in consecrated life. It is hard to put into words the happiness you feel when you know that Jesus seeks you, trusts in you, and with his unmistakable voice also says to you: "Follow me!" (cf. Mk 2:14). (Prayer vigil at Cuatro Vientos, Saturday 20 August 2011)

Benedict XVI also spoke out clearly to the volunteers whose service showed that their minds were open to this call:

As you now go back to your everyday lives, I ask you to treasure this joy-filled experience in your hearts and to grow each day in giving yourselves to God and to others. Perhaps many of you felt a very simple question forming in your hearts, faintly or forcefully as the case may be: What is God asking me to do? What is his plan for my life? Is Christ asking me to follow him more closely? Should I not spend my whole life in the mission to proclaim to the world the greatness of his love through the priesthood, or the consecrated life, or marriage? If this question has surfaced, let the Lord be your guide and become volunteers in the service of the One who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). Your life will achieve fulfilment in ways you cannot imagine (Meeting with WYD volunteers, Sunday 21 August 2011).

Another reason that explains the role of WYD in awakening vocations is the manifestation of the beauty of the Church which we spoke of earlier. Many young people have been touched by this, especially those who live far from large Church centres. In this Church that they find so attractive, they meet many young priests and consecrated people. We could say that they meet the beautiful faces of priests and consecrated people. We know how important it is to meet young priests and young consecrated people. Young people called by God can identify with them and take the step to make a concrete response. Pastoral contact with young priests in particular during the WYD journey – on the bus, waiting for events to start, meals, etc. – is undoubtedly a vocational “trump card”. Here, following the example of the pope, priests can explicitly ask this question, individually and in groups.

Youth ministry and the call for vocations

I shall just say a few words about the call for vocations in youth ministry. Many pastors are very aware that the call for vocations should be made by youth ministry leaders and in schools, universities, parishes and movements. Many dioceses have even joined together their youth ministry and vocations departments. The question is to know what kind of youth ministry will foster priestly and religious vocations.

We must recognise that places in the Church that are spiritual, community-oriented and missionary, are the places that attract vocations. If we look closer, we see that young people progress in their relationship with God if they follow the three pillars of youth ministry: fellowship, prayer and mission.

Fellowship means relating with other Christians in friendship, prayer, mutual witness and sharing of the faith, and a common mission. It takes place as the young people participate in a youth group that meets frequently so that they experience communion, an essential dimension of the Christian life and for which every vocation is in service.

Prayer life includes times of community prayer (praise, listening to the Word of God, intercession and eucharistic adoration), celebration of the sacraments (eucharist and reconciliation), personal prayer time (10 minutes daily). In the sacraments of baptism and reconciliation, young people are invited to the central experience of salvation, the key to Christian life and vocation.

The missionary dimension has several aspects: service to the poor (distributing meals to the homeless, caring for the ill and visiting prisoners), explicit proclamation of Christ (street evangelisation, catechism for children), Church service (group animation, volunteering at liturgies at places of pilgrimage, WYD, responsibilities of various kinds). This gives young people exposure to diaconia and to marturia, essential dimensions of the Christian life and of all vocations.

In each of these domains, a progressive path must be offered to young people. Participation in a regular group takes place after a period of occasional meetings. Entry into personal prayer is done in stages. It comes after some spiritual high moments when they experience Christ's presence and listen to his Word. Service is done in stages as they learn to take on small responsibilities. All of this is connected to the fact that the explicit proclamation of faith comes from fellowship and prayer. Vice versa, this evangelisation increases faith and stimulates prayer.

For all of this they need to be accompanied personally so that they can discover how to progress to the next level, take small decisions themselves, and be helped and encouraged to be faithful to these decisions. Personal accompaniment and spiritual direction are often done by priests and consecrated persons, and this provides an opening for questions about vocation. Young people need instruction in various fields: fellowship, faith and prayer, service and evangelisation. This instruction is catechesis that gives meaning to faith, speaks of coherence in various aspects of their lives and responds to questions that arise in life, the world and culture.

This kind of ministry, founded on the three dimensions of fellowship, spirituality and mission, can help vocations to blossom. In order to start out on a journey of following Christ and leaving all else behind, young people must learn to recognise that God is speaking to them and that they must have trust and try to do what God proposes. Moreover, those who learn to serve others will know how to relinquish their own immediate desires. Those who have experienced the need and joy of evangelisation are ready to receive a call from Christ. Those who are attracted by a community in which each one tries to answer to God's call are also prepared to sincerely address the question of their own vocation. If they meet priests and consecrated people who are happy to be so, they can then more easily give their answer.

We must also mention the opportunities for this presented to young Christians in full time training and volunteering: full-time courses in schools of spirituality and mission for an academic year ("schools of evangelisation"), and voluntary service in a local church for a year or two. These experiences allow for a time of pause and availability that are to be encouraged. All young Catholics between the ages of 18 and 25 should give six months of their lives, or a year or two, just as the Mormons do, and other religious groups. This gives them time for religious education and it opens up the world for them, develops their generosity, and places them in a logic of service to the world. These are years that help in the development of priestly and religious vocations. The same can be said for shorter experiences (a few weeks) of voluntary work in the service of the Church or of the poor.

Young Catholics are generous people. Ask much of them and trust them, as did John Paul II, and he was known for awakening many vocations. In this regard, I would like to quote a South-American Jesuit educator, Rev. Tomas Morales: "If you ask young people for much, they will give even more. If you ask them for little, they give nothing".

In conclusion I would like to say that, when we suggest to young people that they ask themselves the question about vocation, we are not doing so as a recruitment strategy but rather as part of pastoral ministry and education. To ask a question about a call that is given to us all to follow the Lord, is to offer young people an opportunity to go through the existential and decisive stage of their journey in faith in Jesus Christ. It leads to two basic points for every Christian life and every vocation: to believe that Jesus is truly the good shepherd, that Jesus has a plan for us, that Jesus loves each of us personally, and to believe that the Saviour of the world wants to take on collaborators who will take part in his work of salvation.