



*A young woman searches for purpose
and identity at World Youth Day*

A Funny Way of Answering Prayers

by Briana Colton

WHEN I first decided to go to World Youth Day (WYD) in Australia, it was a whim based on what friends had told me about the World Youth Days they had attended in Toronto and Cologne. I kept hearing what an amazing experience of faith it was, and I told them, "I want to go too!"

Though my journey to Australia this summer began as a whim, it turned into a moving experience

at a pivotal time in my life. For me, the pilgrimage was not only a 10,000-mile journey around the globe, it was also an internal journey for a sense of purpose, identity, and independence.

I was going to attend WYD with friends I know through Charis Ministries, a Jesuit work based in Chicago that reaches out spiritually to those in their 20s and 30s. I packed my bags with all the

cold-weather clothing, blankets, and shoes I would need during my adventure Down Under in winter. I also mentally cleared my head and prayed to God to help me find clarity and perspective on my life.

Finding God in Art and Service

Well, God has a funny way of answering prayers, even when



The author and other participants created this painting, based on aboriginal motifs, of individual paths leading to a gathering as a wrap-up of their Jesuit-inspired service project before the start of World Youth Day.

you're expecting the unexpected. It took 24 hours (crossing fifteen time zones as well as the international date line) to fly from Chicago to Los Angeles to Sydney and then to Melbourne, where my WYD experience was to begin.

I spent the first week in Melbourne participating in a Jesuit precursor to WYD called MAGIS08. *Magis*, "more," brought aspects of Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises alive for hundreds of participants through a variety of "experiments," direct service projects in Australia, Cambodia,

Indonesia, and the Philippines.

I was naturally drawn to MAGIS08 for a couple of reasons: During my college years at Marquette University in Milwaukee, I sang at weeknight Masses, led retreats, and provided some leadership for one of the school's service organizations. I really enjoyed the contemplative parts of Ignatian spirituality. After college I spent a year in St. Louis with the Gateway Vincentian Volunteers, learning the practical "roll up your sleeves and dig in" approach to social justice, working side-by-side



with the poor and changing the system from within.

When I moved to Chicago in 2006, I was drawn to Charis because of its connection to the Jesuits. I began attending Charis retreats, Masses, and other programs, and I was eventually asked to be a board member. Now I work at Charis full-time writing grant proposals and coordinating fundraising efforts.

Melissa Chlopecki and Lori Rogers were among the Charis Ministries group at World Youth Day, actually a week long. Each day had a special event, such as stations of the cross, a pilgrimage walk to the vigil, and Mass with the pope.

Experiment

In Melbourne, the winter weather meant cold temps and lots of rain. Our group from Charis joined fellow pilgrims from Ireland, Croatia, Italy, India, and Korea for our experiment, "Finding God in Art and Service." For a week we worked at the Sacred Heart Mission, which provides support to poor and homeless men and women who are often battling drug addictions or mental illness. They have a hot meal program, an art program, a food pantry, a second-



MAGIS08

IGNATIUS used the word *magis* to talk about a quest for the greater good, always striving for the greater glory of God. The MAGIS08 World Youth Day program, which took place prior to World Youth Day, built on Ignatius's idea of experiencing unfamiliar situations as a way to see God and self in new ways. The roughly 2,000 participants in MAGIS08 came from many different countries to engage in a week of service projects in 46 locations across Australia, Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, experiencing many different cultures. They then gathered for prayer and reflection in Sydney for three days before World Youth Day.

fellow pilgrims and I shared a lot of laughter and stories from our home countries while dicing tomatoes, peeling oranges, and clearing tables. In the serving line, we greeted each guest with a smile and asked, "Roast beef and potatoes or chicken and rice?" Christ is indeed found in all people, including those on society's fringes.

This discovery of Christ in others continued during the afternoon art program. I shared a table and some pastels with mission guests and watched barriers break down in the simple act of asking, "What color do you think I should use next?" It didn't matter that their clothes were tattered and they carried most all of their belongings with them. They were people who enjoyed sharing conversa-

has handled oppression by British and Australian governments. After participating in an annual outdoor Aboriginal festival at the Royal Botanic Gardens, I watched in awe as my new friends Iva and Ronan spent twenty minutes with one of the musicians asking about his life and culture. His love of the earth's natural beauty and color inspired our group's banner, which summarized the week's experience and was shared with other experiment groups at the Ignatian gathering in Sydney at the end of MAGIS08.

Discovering "the more"

It was tough to make the transition from being one of a group of 30 doing service to being one of 200,000 crowding Sydney for concerts, catechetical sessions, and the pope's visit. Throughout the week we would run into French pilgrims singing their national anthem, Italians chanting *Benedetto!* and countless others sporting their country's flags on backpacks and T-shirts, but cultural pride was overshadowed by a shared belief in the same God and faith that brought us to Australia.

WYD participants were called to "Receive the Power of the Holy Spirit, and Be a Light Unto the World," and all of us became living examples of this theme. Pilgrimages often inspire an image of backpacking on foot through the countryside visiting religious sites and being transformed by the silence and rigor of the journey. My experience of the WYD pilgrimage was one of finding God in two very modern, very Western cities where we traveled mostly by buses and trains, slept in schools and hotels, and walked past designer stores, theaters, restaurants, and museums on the way to church.

In a group

While it's normally really hard for me to be blatantly religious in



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This cross and icon of Mary have become fixtures of World Youth Days. They travel around the world, being passed from group to group, prior to the events. They were taken to Australian dioceses before being brought to Sydney.

hand clothing store, and more. We also explored the National Galleries of Victoria, learned about Aboriginal culture, and spent time creating our own art.

I witnessed my "more" often during our time at the mission. We bundled ourselves in layers of clothing and helped prepare and serve lunch for the mission's guests. Donning hair nets, my

tion and a love of art, even if their lives were vastly different from my own. That was something I hadn't experienced since finishing my volunteer year.

I was also encouraged by the beauty, sacredness, and strength of the Aboriginal culture, which was evident in their art and rituals. My fellow pilgrims and I were inspired by how the indigenous population

secular settings, I found comfort in being part of a larger group doing the same thing. One night we sat on the Sydney Opera House steps listening to an African “Alleluia” band and choir while trying to warm up with a simple meal of beef stew and rolls with an orange and a Sara Lee bar on the side. Even though we were just eating dinner in the cold and listening to music, we were witnessing our faith to the world in front of Sydney’s most recognizable site.

I’d come to Australia searching for a sense of purpose and independence, and while there I began to understand somewhat better the lessons on companionship the Spiritual Exercises tried to teach us in our WYD pilgrim journals.

I walked over three kilometers with my belongings strapped to my back to a racecourse, of all places, where participants spent the night before Sunday Mass with the pope. It was at the evening vigil that I finally understood what being part of the universal Church meant. Thousands of candles lit the cold night sky as I listened to the readings and petitions in multiple languages, watched Benedict venerate the host, and sang the Alleluia refrain of the WYD theme song *Receive the Power* with fellow pilgrims.

I also became more deeply connected to Mary on this trip, especially in Sydney. The seat of the Archdiocese of Sydney is at St. Mary’s Cathedral, and one WYD activity was to take a “pilgrimage

was from the Annunciation when Mary said, “I am the handmaiden of the Lord; let it be done to me as you say.”

My friends Lori and Melissa joined me on this walk, but once inside, we went our own ways. I felt a sense of peace, reverence, and awe amid the high stone arches and side chapels. I spent my time walking around, reading the stories of two WYD-featured saints, St. Mary MacKillop and St. Pier Giorgio Frassati, who in their youth showed a deep faith in God and an ability to follow his will. I admire people who can so easily and so freely give of themselves to God and to others, and I found myself praying for that blessing in front of a tabernacle at the back of the church and in front of a painting of Mary as Our Lady of the Southern Cross.




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Pope Benedict XVI traveled by popemobile past Sydney’s opera house to Randwick Racecourse, where WYD participants had gathered for a vigil on Saturday night. The pope returned the next morning for a concluding Mass.

Everybody, from the bishops and cardinals who presided at Masses throughout the week to the thousands of pilgrims from wildly different backgrounds, shared the same faith.

walk” to the cathedral. The security was tighter than that at an airport, but those in line got to read and reflect on banners with biblical quotes from Mary’s life placed along the route. My favorite quote

with, and having learned how to give of myself selflessly to God and others. The pilgrimage in Australia may be over, but Christ continues to guide me on my journey back in the States. 

The Grace of the Journey

During our last three days in Australia I reflected on the whole journey as we explored the beauty of the Blue Mountains, played with koalas, and sandboarded on dunes. Did I establish my independence? Did I figure out who I am, and who God wants me to be? No. I didn’t find all the answers, but I did come back knowing that attending Mass and experiencing the Eucharist are central to my experience of God. I came back knowing how vast and beautiful the Catholic faith is, having found friends from the world over to share that faith



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