Vatican







NCR spoke to attendees at World Youth Day in Lisbon, Portugal, including (left to right) Rafael Zorita, Joao Paulo Rodrigues and Natalie Lucey. (NCR photos/Brian Fraga)



by Brian Fraga

Staff Reporter

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Lisbon, Portugal — August 4, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Some teenagers and young adults jumped at the chance to attend World Youth Day in Portugal for the excitement and experience of being abroad. Others described an interior restlessness that drew them to Lisbon.

"God has just been speaking to each of us in our hearts," Natalie Lucey, an Arizona resident, said as she walked toward Lisbon's Eduardo VII Park, where an estimated half-million people gathered Aug. 3 to greet Pope Francis for World Youth Day's official welcome ceremony.

An American flag draped around her shoulders, Lucey and an international group of 150 people walked together up a cordoned-off avenue leading to the park, where security guards and volunteers guided them to spaces where they could congregate.

For Lucey, 32, it was her second World Youth Day; she attended the festival in 2016 when Poland hosted the event. Lucey told NCR a friend's invitation was the impetus she needed to attend World Youth Day this year.

"And the graces I've received from doing that have been unbelievable," she said.

The national flags of all the pilgrim groups that greeted Francis spoke to the diversity that World Youth Days attract. Young people from North America, Europe, Asia, South America, Africa, Australia and New Zealand all gathered in the park, exchanging friendly nods and smiles if they were unable to find a common language.

"This is a global event of all the youth. There are so many youth from all over the world," Rafael Zorita, 17, of Mexico told NCR in Spanish. As a Catholic, Zorita said he wanted to be at World Youth Day, though he added that the gathering is open to everybody.

Related: Make room for everyone in the church, Pope Francis tells young people in Portugal

"What I like the most is that the pope said that God calls each person by name," Zorita said. "For example, there are people from Uruguay, China, Japan, [Korea]. It is kind of amazing because God is connecting so many people."

About 100 feet from Zorita, who wore a black sombrero and a white T-shirt autographed by other pilgrims, a group of students from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh camped out by a tree. They noticed a reporter's Boston Red Sox hat and said hello.

"Just being with thousands and thousands of other Catholics, it's an amazing experience. To see all these different cultures but to still all be united in our faith," said Hannah Valenty, 21, a physics major who said she had not traveled outside of the United States until arriving in Portugal.

"And Pope Francis is awesome," Valenty added. "I just want to see him too."

Valenty's fellow Duquesne students, Emma Polen, Kate Spadavecchia, and Gwendolyn Sobkowiak, nodded in agreement. They complimented the hospitality of their host nation, adding that even grocery store clerks had shown them unexpected kindness.



From left to right: Duquesne University students Gwendolyn Sobkowiak, Kate Spadavecchia, Emma Polen, Hannah Valenty (NCR photos/Brian Fraga)

"Everyone has just been so kind and patient, and just respectful, even if we don't speak Portuguese. They're very open to helping us out," said Sobkowiak, who is a Quaker but added that she was enjoying the Catholic youth festival.

Also at Eduardo VII Park, 17-year-old Joao Paulo Rodrigues of Lisbon told NCR in his native Portuguese language that he was moved by the encounters with people his age from all over the world.

"It's an opportunity to speak with others, to exchange experiences, to share stories, and to make friendships," said Rodrigues, who added that he is inspired to live his life as a Catholic "with intensity."

"If I were an atheist, I'd be an intense atheist," he said. "Being Catholic, I'm Catholic at heart. And for this reason, I have to always live with Christ in my day-to-day life."

Advertisement

Other young Catholics at Eduardo VII Park did not describe having as strong a religious instinct or devotion.

For young pilgrims like Jason David Silva-Lopez his brother, Mark Alexis, both from Montreal, World Youth Day felt more like the beginning of a journey of discovering what the Catholic faith will mean to them in life.

"I really want to go deeper into my roots," said Silva-Lopez, who added that the diversity of life he had already experienced at World Youth Day had convinced him of the need to build bridges between cultures.

"You need to accept everyone, whether or not their religion is the same as yours," he said. "Just embrace them. Just because someone has a different religion, it doesn't mean they're as different from you as you think they are."

This story appears in the **World Youth Day 2023** feature series. View the full series
.
A version of this story appeared in the **Aug 18-31, 2023** print issue under the headline: New friendships: Vignettes from World Youth Day.