Spirituality



Mark Piper (center) at World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany in 2005. (Courtesy of Mark Piper)



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Twenty Augusts ago, I was a 17-year-old kid from St. Ann parish in Stoughton, Wisconsin on a bus en route to Cologne, Germany for World Youth Day 2005. On that bus, one of the older priests in our group provided us with a succinct language lesson.

"Repeat after me, and memorize: Please — *Bitte*. Thank you — *Danke*. The toilet? — *die Toiletten*? These three phrases will get you through 90 percent of the day."

With our official World Youth Day backpacks strapped over our shoulders, we joined a swath of humanity teeming about along the River Rhine; flags were waved, the streets echoed with chants and a guy dressed as John the Baptist made a scene in front of the Kolner Dom (Cologne Cathedral). Some of the street signs were dour, welcoming the newly elected German Pontiff Benedict XVI, back to his "godless" homeland. Yet down the river the pope sailed and up a potato field we trudged, to camp out for Mass at the end of the week.



The official World Youth Day backpack of 2005. (Courtesy of Mark Piper)

In homes and hotels, bread was broken and hospitality suffused all. In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (10:10). The formation of friendships and shared meaning-making made those words seem apt — not to mention the more than a little self-satisfaction at being able to say *bitte*, *danke* and *die toiletten*. And, I confess, I felt all of this positivity even before I imbibed my first ever beer, a Kölsch.

But a great experience does not mean that all memories are happy, nor that all lessons are joyfully learned. Following World Youth Day, our group went to Dachau, the concentration camp, where we were given information on Jews, political and

labor dissidents and also Catholic clergy. The sobering lesson came to mind recently when Pope Leo reminded us that God as our Father means we are all brothers and sisters; when we "other" those who may be different than ourselves, hate has blinded our sight like moral cataracts.

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Later, in Salzburg, a priest in our group said Mass in a beautiful baroque convent chapel. There was an indigent man in the first pew, and during the homily he began muttering and interrupting the priest. I couldn't hear what he said, but the priest's reaction was severe: an outburst of anger towards the man. At the time I rationalized that the priest, a jail chaplain back home, must know when and how to interact in such situations – but now I can see that he was in error, even if I can empathize with the position he was in. No one is above reproach, and acknowledging that clergy too fall short can be an important lesson.

In spite of concluding at that World Youth Day that I would become a priest, I eventually discerned a different type of fatherhood and now have two wonderful kids. I no longer carry that blue woven World Youth Day backpack, but as a dad I continue to rely on gratitude (*danke*), good manners (*bitte*) and knowing where the bathroom is (*die toiletten*) to get me through 90 percent of the day. I recommend a German Kölsch to carry you the rest of the way. After 20 years, it's still my favorite beer.