NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

U.S. pilgrims cope with expenses, logistics to get to World Youth Day

Carol Zimmermann Catholic News Service | May. 26, 2008

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- The logistics of bringing tens of thousands of young people together for World Youth Day are complicated, but this year's July 15-20 event in Sydney, Australia, has the added hurdle of the major expense for pilgrims just to get there.

This is especially true for U.S. pilgrims, who are about 9,000 miles away and face airline tickets ranging from $2,000 to $5,000.

Tickets also have been hard to come by because of the limited number of carriers with flights from the United States to Australia -- namely, Qantas and United Airlines.

Pat Pacer, a youth ministry coordinator with the Chicago Archdiocese, said the trip's expense, coupled with a lack of flexibility to purchase more tickets, brought attendance numbers down considerably for their group.

The Chicago Archdiocese sent 2,000 pilgrims to World Youth Day in Toronto in 2002. Three years later it sent 500 youths to World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany. This year it is sending 43 pilgrims.

Pacer told Catholic News Service May 16 that he fields calls almost daily from people who suddenly want to go to World Youth Day. Unfortunately, he said, he cannot accommodate them because the group tickets purchased months ago at a discounted rate of $2,100 are no longer available.

In fact, those tickets were not available one week after the initial purchase. Even the more expensive tickets the group purchased later at $3,000 each are also long gone. One group that purchased last-minute tickets, in May, was charged $5,100 per ticket.

A group of 75 pilgrims from the Diocese of Colorado Springs, Colo., had its share of travel frustrations nearly a year before the actual event.

The group made a deposit on the trip last summer based on airfare prices quoted to pilgrims through a Colorado organization called Catholics for Pilgrimages. In September, United Airlines informed the tour group its itinerary had been canceled. The group was told another itinerary was available, but the price tag would be twice the initial amount.

In an effort to curb costs, the group altered its trip, purchasing airline tickets that will take participants to Australia via Seoul, South Korea, where members plan to spend two days visiting Catholic sites prior to World Youth Day. Other groups similarly purchased airline tickets through Asia for a cheaper rate.

A group from the Diocese of Madison, Wis., is traveling through Tokyo and a group from the Diocese of Rockville Centre, N.Y., is spending a few days in Singapore. Some groups had to split up and travel on different airlines to save money.

A Qantas representative told CNS the majority of direct flights from the United States and Australia were

through Los Angeles, which is a 20-hour flight. The airline added one flight from the United States for World Youth Day.

A group of students from the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio, also had to amend its initial flight plans when told last August by a Qantas representative that tickets the students had reserved in 2006 were no longer available.

The group, which had planned its itinerary well in advance, had to scramble to get new tickets at a higher price. The students also changed their initial plan for staying in New Zealand prior to World Youth Day to going there after the event.

"To be informed we no longer had seats was quite a shock," Franciscan Father Dave Pivonka, the pilgrims' spiritual director, wrote to group members last fall. But he added that "with so many blessings that will come from this trip, there are bound to be some bumps along the way."

Salesian Sister Maryann Schaefer, who is leading a group of 66 pilgrims from the Salesian Youth Movement to World Youth Day, knows all too well about bumps along the way.

In fact, she uses somewhat stronger words, calling the exorbitant ticket costs and other logistical frustrations with registering for the event both "utterly ridiculous" and "horrendous."

Sister Shaefer, director of admissions for Mary Help of Christians School in North Haledon, N.J., has chaperoned pilgrims to seven World Youth Days, so she knows a thing or two about lining up group registrations and transportation.

She began planning for the Sydney trip in 2006 and tried, unsuccessfully, to book airline tickets well in advance. When the group was finally able to purchase tickets, the fares were more costly than anticipated.

And when the group added two tickets a week later for two more members, each of them cost more than $1,500 above what the other tickets cost, she told CNS May 23.

Sister Schaefer had to ask pilgrims for extra money. When other fees increased for their registration package, she turned to parishioners for financial support.

"The church works with the poor; we're not the rich," she said.

Now the group is focused on what the World Youth Day experience is about. "Forget about everything else," she said. "We're going to find the Lord."

Because of the expenses involved, the 2008 crowd might be a little older than the crowd at previous World Youth Day gatherings.

Mary Jansen, director of the Office of Young Adult Ministry in the San Francisco Archdiocese, which is taking 50 pilgrims, said the group was not involved in fundraising efforts, primarily because those heading to Sydney are working adults and they plan to pay for the trip as if it were their summer vacation.

The World Youth Day Web site -- www.wyd2008.org -- offers possible fundraising ideas such as bake sales, parish dinners, car washes and raffles.

High school students who are parishioners of St. Bernard of Clairvaux Parish in Bridgewater, N.J., followed the site's suggestions and then some. They sponsored family night at a local restaurant, a holiday tree sale, a Mother's Day flower sale, a basket raffle, a bake sale and a pancake breakfast.

Father Joseph G. Celano, pastor, said he wasn't surprised at how well the parish rallied to support the youths because the parish benefits from what the pilgrims bring back with them.

"Their excitement is contagious," he said "It spreads to all those privileged enough to work directly with these young people and then on to the whole parish. It reawakens our faith and raises our spirits."

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Contributing to this story were Jim Myers in Colorado Springs and Chris Donahue in Bridgewater.

Source URL (retrieved on *08/25/2016 - 16:44*): https://www.ncronline.org/news/us-pilgrims-cope-expenses-logistics-get-world-youth-day