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Travel firm's bankruptcy upends World Youth Day pilgrimage plans

by Sam Lucero by Catholic News Service

World Youth Day 2013

Green Bay, Wis. — The excitement of attending World Youth Day 2013 in Rio de Janeiro turned to disappointment for 24 Catholics in the diocese of Green Bay after learning that the agency overseeing travel arrangements to Brazil claimed bankruptcy June 10.

As a result of ITC Tours' bankruptcy filing, the diocese of Green Bay's pilgrimage to Brazil was canceled. Joe Bound, diocesan director of the Department of Education and pilgrimage coordinator, said Green Bay was among around 20 U.S. dioceses affected by the bankruptcy.

Paul Jarzembowski, program coordinator for youth and young adult ministry in the Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, said he was not sure of the exact number of dioceses working with ITC Tours. "We're trying to track that down," he told *The Compass*, Green Bay's diocesan newspaper.

Green Bay's pilgrims each paid \$3,900 to attend World Youth Day with the diocesan contingent.

"The diocese has agreed to refund all of the payments made to those who issued checks for WYD 2013," Bound told *The Compass* in an email. He said the diocese is in the process of seeking a full refund of \$79,499 paid to ITC.

Deacon Tim Reilly, general director of the diocesan Curia, said he is in discussion with representatives of the other dioceses affected by the bankruptcy. "We have a common goal of recovering funds paid to the travel company without services delivered," he told *The Compass*.

In a June 10 letter to Bound, ITC Tours owner Vince Maffucci said the bankruptcy filing "will include all arrangements pertaining to WYD Rio." He told Bound that ITC would "make every effort to reimburse all monies received (from the diocese) as soon as possible."

Reached by phone July 10, Maffucci told *The Compass* he was advised to have his attorney speak on the matter. Jeffrey Posin, who is representing ITC Tours, did not return calls from *The Compass*.

Bound was told that ITC's bankruptcy claim was the result of the company's overbooking of World Youth Day pilgrims with another agency that required immediate payment. "(Maffucci) asked this third party for money back for the unrealized number of pilgrims but never received it," said Bound.

Because the bankruptcy was announced six weeks before World Youth Day, and the additional expenses in rescheduling travel, it was impossible for the diocese to arrange an alternate plan.

In a June 12 letter, Bound informed travelers that the pilgrimage, which the diocese began planning last September, was canceled and that the diocese would refund each of them. He told them that they could try to make their own arrangements. "We are deeply sorry that this has happened and hope that those who decide to go to World Youth Day 2013 on their own have a very prayerful and spirit-filled experience," he said.

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ITC Tours has been assisting U.S. dioceses with World Youth Day pilgrimages since at least 2000.

According to Bound, the diocese contracted with ITC for World Youth Day 2011 in Madrid. "I am aware of some dioceses having used this company for the previous five World Youth Days and have always been happy with the service they received from ITC Tours," said Bound.

Alaska's Anchorage Archdiocese and Juneau and Fairbanks dioceses were among the other dioceses affected. Rather than reimburse travelers their lost funds, the Alaska bishops decided to make new arrangements -- at an additional cost of at least \$10,000 -- for the pilgrims.

The bishops of those respective dioceses, Archbishop Roger Schwietz, Bishop Edward Burns and Bishop Donald Kettler, issued a statement June 13 regarding ITC Tours' bankruptcy, saying they had used ITC Tours for the past six World Youth Days. For Rio, they said, 50 participants from the three dioceses had registered and paid for World Youth Day and they estimated about \$181,000 "has been lost to the pending bankruptcy."

They will submit a claim but noted "it will take years to see whether we recover anything." In the meantime, the bishops said, they faced "a hard choice" -- to cancel the trip or "try and continue." "After hearing from some donors that they would be willing to contribute to continuing with the pilgrimage, we decided to continue forward," the prelates said.

The three dioceses, through the Alaska Catholic Conference, were also collecting donations to help recoup the lost funds.

The archdiocese of Washington also was planning a World Youth Day pilgrimage through ITC Tours. Chieko Noguchi Scheve, director of media and public relations for the archdiocese, said there were 36 pilgrims scheduled to go to Rio de Janeiro. She said all of the pilgrims received refunds and the

archdiocese has no plans to reschedule a pilgrimage to Brazil.

Instead, the archdiocese is hosting "Rio in DC," a World Youth Day event for young adults, on July 27. "It's really an opportunity to enter into the World Youth Day experience and make a pilgrimage of the heart," Noguchi Scheve told *The Compass*. The archdiocese is also seeking to enter a claim for recovery of funds.

The Green Bay diocese is offering its own alternative World Youth Day event for young adults July 27.

Amy Rosteing, one of the 24 diocesan members planning to attend World Youth Day, said while she was disappointed by the cancellation, she was not upset. She was planning to go with her husband and two adult children to Rio.

Rosteing said she met ITC Tours owner Maffucci during World Youth Day 2011. "He was there every time we needed him. My trust was with him, too," she said.

[Sam Lucero is news and information manager of The Compass, newspaper of the diocese of Green Bay, Wis.]

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