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Reasons for attending World Youth Day as diverse as attendees themselves

by April Gutierrez

Young Voices
World Youth Day 2013

Many young Catholics are packing their suitcases, passport in tow, and excitedly anticipating Pope Francis' first World Youth Day. His first pastoral visit to Lampedusa to show compassion for immigrants, his washing the feet of a Muslim woman prisoner on Holy Thursday, and his being named Man of the Year by Italy's *Vanity Fair* set the stage for an exciting week in Brazil with young Catholics from around the world.

World Youth Day, held this year between July 23 and 28 in Rio de Janeiro, is celebrated in a different country generally every three years with young adults from all over the world. Pope Francis will make his first international trip to the world's largest Catholic country for this year's festivities. The closing weekend is patterned after the Easter Triduum, with citywide Stations of the Cross on Friday and a final Sunday Mass with the pope, celebrating with the world's "parish."

When asked the relevance of World Youth Day, Santiago Bunce, 27, of Argentina replied:

As a young Catholic, the existence and popularity of WYD is a reminder of the vibrancy and commitment that exist within our Catholic community. Catholicism, as all religions, flourishes on sharing experiences within our community. Not at the exclusion of others, but there is something very powerful that is shared among individuals when the community engages together. It may be easy for young Catholics, myself included at times, to be disheartened with dogmatic practices within the church and the conflict that arises between orthodox traditions and progressive developments in our world today. Yet we remain committed to our faith. Part of it may be that we grew up with the faith so it is part of our routine, but I believe our desire to engage our faith as

Catholics, the community as a whole, and our hope for the church in the future influence us more than the routine we may have developed. WYD is an opportunity to come together with others in the church who undoubtedly have struggled with similar issues as young people and as Catholics and to collectively be strengthened by our shared commitment and hope.

According to independent.ie, World Youth Day was expected to bring in 2 million pilgrims, but as of July 5, only 320,000 were registered, "with government officials indicating that they now may only be expecting less than half the initial estimate." There is much controversy regarding the cost of WYD and its environmental impact. While there are macrocosmic concerns about WYD operations, people's personal reasons for attending are compelling and diverse.

Among the more than 1 million people gathering in faith will be six pilgrims, including Megan Graves, from Equally Blessed, a group of Catholics committed to equality in the church for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Graves told a Call to Action blog, "I would like to be a witness for the LGBTQ community because my Catholic faith challenges me to stand up and advocate for those who are turned away and belittled by society, even if I must stand up to my own faith who has taught me these very values." Some hope World Youth Day will be a place to not only to hear and see, but to be seen and heard.

Additionally, many pilgrims choose to extend their time through various organizations; for example, Jesuit institutions often will join together for Magis. Magis pilgrims began traveling through Brazil on Monday and will do so until World Youth Day begins July 23. Jesuit scholastic Brendan Busse of The Jesuit Post tweeted that the Magis pilgrims celebrated their opening Mass Monday in a chapel that had not seen a Mass since the Jesuits were expelled from Brazil and all Portuguese holdings in 1760.

Ruby Gutierrez, 21, of Los Angeles said she feels graced by the opportunity to travel to World Youth Day. She is going with co-workers from Our Lady of Talpa, where she works in the Extended Day Program. Gutierrez is a student at East Los Angeles College.

I am always open to strengthening my faith. [At work,] I was randomly talking about World Youth Day and how I have wanted to attend one for as long as I can remember. My boss overheard me say that; she made phone calls and registered me on time without me knowing! I was speechless and could not believe that I was attending WYD with such a spiritual, motivating group. The relevance of WYD for me as a young adult Catholic is that I am able to strengthen my faith and go on this pilgrimage not worrying about "fitting in." Many people my age have drifted away from the religion -- their faith has weakened -- and I have not. My job is to pull those people back and make them realize that, "Hey God is cool, too, he'll always be the cool kid on the block."

Bunce and Gutierrez also offered up some thoughts on Pope Francis:

Bunce:

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Despite being in Argentina, I have not been following the coverage of Pope Francis very closely. However, I can say that my impression of the pope is that he is a humble man, eager to display the church as a church for the poor. I believe he is a pope who is hoping to reconcile the most important dogmatic stances and traditional teachings that have solidified the foundation of the church, with the changing and developing world. [Pope Francis is] a man who hopes to attract more followers without distancing from veteran Catholics. He seems like a truly humble man, and

I can only hope that he is surrounded by a set of individuals who are equally eager to promote the best qualities of our faith and address the aspects in which we are lacking.

Gutierrez:

Pope Francis is a mirror image of God on Earth. I say this because Pope Francis is so humble, loving and relatable. As a Latina, having a Latino pope is just breathtaking. I hope to be able to touch Pope Francis on my pilgrimage, as he'll make his way through the crowd on the popemobile. The one major thing that has stuck with me about Pope Francis is that he will make Pope John Paul II a saint. That is just incredible and warms my heart. I honestly just want to hear him speak in person. Whatever he says, I will take in happily and with an open heart.

[April Gutierrez is a graduate of Boston College School the Theology and Ministry.]

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