

This article was originally printed in the October 2011 issue of New Earth, the newspaper for the Diocese of Fargo.

World Youth Day: A true pilgrimage for our group

Kathy Loney

When was the last time you planned a family vacation; spent years saving the necessary funds; worked out the itinerary several times over; constantly connected with the tour company to make sure you had not forgotten to confirm your housing, your car rentals, your train connections, your flight arrangements; made sure every "t" was crossed and every "i" dotted, to find out the very first day of your trip that your flight is being diverted, making you late for your international flight and not knowing if you will even get to your destination, much less receive your luggage!

Well, guess what! That was the beginning of a pilgrimage to Madrid, Spain, that 48 pilgrims will not forget for a long time. The planning for World Youth Day, Madrid began in 2008, when several prospective pilgrims met to discuss the 19-day itinerary that was already in the works. It was to include a four-day visit to Fatima in Portugal, an adventure to southern Spain to experience the cultural immersion program called "Days in the Diocese" and to talk about all the possibilities that could happen while being involved with the five days that are called "World Youth Day."

The big day finally arrived Aug. 6, and all the pilgrims met at the Cathedral of St. Mary in Fargo for Mass with Bishop Samuel Aquila. Bishop Aquila talked about some of the struggles that could occur while on this pilgrimage but, reinforced that Christ would be with us every step of the way.

The pilgrimage was off and running, but not without some challenges such as interruptions and changes to the carefully planned itinerary, lost luggage, personality clashes, loss of sleep, foreign food, extremely hot weather, unforeseen living quarters that were not up to everyone's standards, sickness and the list goes on. But our pilgrimage also had many blessings. Mass every day, sometimes in beautiful churches, sometimes wherever we could accommodate our group with a table for an altar, some chairs and, of course, Jesus.

At Fatima, there were tremendous blessings for the participants, which included: the beautiful surroundings we encountered; the tour of the homes where the little children who experienced the Blessed Virgin's appearance had lived; the Stations of the Cross outside the little village amongst the olive trees; meeting wonderful people who wanted some of our group to be a part of the rosary by singing and processing around the immense courtyard.

Our immersion program with Spaniards in the small villages of Alconera, Azuaga and Lluvera were filled with blessings. We were blessed to meet many wonderful people who were extremely concerned about our welfare and took great care to see that we were well fed, housed, entertained and educated in their many customs and traditions.

At the top of a mountain we encountered a welcoming party for all the pilgrims in this area of Spain and were invited to participate in games and icebreakers to get to know each other better. There were people from all over the world who spoke English. We also had an opportunity to pray together and visit some of the remote but elaborate churches that graced the mountain areas.

After our immersion experience, we headed into Madrid to begin the final stage of our pilgrimage. After a several-hour wait along the streets of Madrid, in areas that were not at all comfortable, some of our pilgrims were able to encounter Pope Benedict XVI as he made his grand entrance into Madrid. This grand entrance kick-starts the beginning of the many activities of World Youth Day.

Yes, streets were packed with pilgrims, walking and riding the underground metro system to see the many sites that Madrid has to offer. Singing, drums beating, lots of excited chatter is what is encountered during World Youth Day on the streets of Madrid. Why? For many it is an opportunity to see Christ in action, to experience him in the many faces that come from all over the world.

Some come to experience the wonderful catechesis given by the many bishops who volunteer to teach. We were privileged to find our very own Bishop Aquila teaching one morning at a small parish a distance from our accommodations. We totally enjoyed his catechesis session and the opportunity to see him interact with the young adults and answer their many questions.

The highlight of this World Youth Day experience - the all-night vigil and Papal Mass - was unfortunately hampered by a quick rain and wind storm that made its presence during the evening vigil. Some pilgrims were drenched, some never received their food, some never slept, some were distracted by ants and beetles coming up out of the ground. And why do pilgrims encounter such uncomfortable moments?

I truly hope it is to experience the true Jesus Christ - the Jesus Christ we love and see in each other. We are one body, the body of Christ and we do not stand alone - especially during World Youth Day!

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