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World Youth Day, Madrid 2011: A magical gift

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A magical gift

Emily Dunbar and William Kerr

St Theresa Shrine of the Little Flower Parish, Scarborough, Ontario

For two weeks this past summer we had the most enriching and enlightening experience — the final event in two years of preparation! We travelled from Canada to Portugal and Spain with 12 members of the Youth Mission from St Theresa Shrine of the Little Flower Parish in Scarborough, Ontario. We went with young people who were in high school, university and college. In addition, our group was supported by the CEO of a telecommunications company, a high school principal, and a priest.

World Youth Day (WYD) wasn't just being in a strange country or in Europe for the first time. It wasn't just seeing the Pope. It became a profession of our own faith and our personal convictions. We became empowered to open ourselves up to others and their faith.

Fatima

Before we went to Madrid we spent some days in Portugal. Our time at Fatima was in itself a neat thing, but the truly amazing part was the Mass that Father Obinna had with us about 15 metres from the bush where Mary on the 13th May 1917 visited the three children — Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta. It made the Fatima story our story.

We also saw some of the castles where Crusaders would stop and rest on their journey through Europe. Kind of like us.

He talked to us like real people

While in Madrid, we attended catechism sessions pretty much daily. Every speaker had interesting and important things to say, but it was Archbishop (now Cardinal) Dolan, from New York City, who stole the show on the last day. He talked to us like real people and told very relevant stories that made us think and also made us laugh. He was awesome and inspiring.

During the trip we met huge numbers of Catholics from Europe, South Africa, USA and Asia. In them, as well as in the members of our own parish, we encountered people experiencing their joy and passion in the Catholic faith. It seems that the real purpose of World Youth Days is to spread our faith as we experience it and to embody that same faith in our own lives.

Why not these young people in *our* churches?

The animated mood in Madrid, the dry sun, the sometimes challenging encounters, seeing the faith and strength of all these young people made us wonder why we don't find all these young people in our churches on Sunday. Something must be wrong somewhere, either from us young people or from the hierarchies of the church. Hope we figure it out sooner rather than later.

During the campout at the air base for the vigil Mass, with lightning all around us, tents flying and horizontal rain, Pope Benedict never left his flock. It was fun watching bishops, priests, nuns and the laity as one happy family not minding the rain. Together we waited out the storm. Seeing how strong and courageous all the young people were, the Pope thanked everyone in these words: "Thank you young people, you rejuvenate the Pope, inspire the Church, and refresh a world thirsty for hope and courage."

Positives ... and negatives

Our group was lucky. Father Obinna not only gave every one of us a great perspective throughout our trip and said daily Mass for us — he was a lot of fun too. He encouraged us to see the storm not as rain, but as God blessing us and sprinkling us with holy water.

Of course, it would not be hard to find some negatives about this year's WYD in Madrid. It was hot, crowded and most of the Spanish people did not understand anything you said. And toilets were few and far between. But that's only if you think that way.



Two million people make for some big crowds, but most of those people were there for the same reason and were a pleasure to meet and talk to, even if it was only for a minute or two. As for the language barrier, we breached it by using sign language, gesturing and pointing.

Proud to say “I am a Catholic”

It was a true pilgrimage: physically very hard at times, but the spirit of the event, the people that came with us and those we met, the incredible feeling of being surrounded by and part of a group that was proud to say “I am a Catholic” will remain forever in our memory. We are thankful for this incredible experience because, although it was not always easy or fun, we were always surrounded by people of a like mind and heart.

We cannot remember the name of the school we slept in or that Spanish phrase that everyone yelled over and over and over again, but we will remember the bond we formed within our group, as well as with those we met on this faith journey. While it started with our preparation in Scarborough, it truly

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— Pope Benedict XVI

became a magical gift because of everyone who spoke with us and touched us during the World Youth Day experience.

Our hope is that we will be able to give back, both now and in the future, a little bit of what we have learned. To all the young people who came and to those who couldn't make it, we leave you with the words of Pope Benedict: “The Pope thanks you for your affection and sends you out as ambassadors of the joy that our world needs.”

Rio de Janeiro 2013 – See you there! ■

