

A special presentation to the Pontifical Council for the Laity and delegates to the 2014 International Meeting on World Youth Day

THE IMPACT OF WORLD YOUTH DAY IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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By the numbers, the United States brought 10,000 young people to Rio de Janeiro. Thirty-five bishops and countless priests, religious, and lay ecclesial ministers from the U.S. joined those pilgrims on their journey of faith. While it is difficult to gauge the impact of World Youth Day on 10,000 people (and in general, it is even harder to measure the fruits of so many so soon after the WYD event), I will attempt to give some general thoughts on our country's reaction to WYD in 2013 in particular, and to WYD as a phenomenon in general.



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Let me also say that the international World Youth Days have made a significant impact on the Church in the United States since 1993, when our country hosted this incredible event in Denver, Colorado. There are countless stories of how this experience has affected the lives of our young people, not to mention the rejuvenation of faith among all generations who watch the events and are renewed in their own way. I stand here as a testament to that impact. Twenty-one years ago, the World Youth Day gathering in Denver changed my life – and put me on a course to give my life's work to the Catholic Church, leading to my current service to the Bishops of the United States. Speaking personally, even in the subsequent years, the WYD experience has

contributed to my own faith journey; watching new young people go through the pilgrimage enriches my own experience of WYD over and over again. Now that WYD is itself moving through its own “young adulthood” (as an event, it is almost 30 years old), we are beginning to see the lasting impact of this event on Catholic life in the United States. Men and women like me, who experienced WYD as a youth or young adult, are now stepping into significant roles in the leadership of the Church in the U.S. When we do something really good for thirty consecutive years, even more good will result – and we are already seeing that emerge.

To that effect, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, through its research, has seen the vocational impact of World Youth Day, especially over the past several years. We found that WYD has played a significant role among those considering or pursuing a life of service to the Church as a priest, religious sister or brother, or lay ecclesial minister. In the United States, 1 in 5 priests ordained in 2013 and 1 in 4 religious men and women who professed vows in 2013 participated in and had a good experience of World Youth Day; this is a percentage that continues to rise with each successive year as more young priests and religious are “alumni” of past WYDs. And, in particular for the United States, WYD has drawn many people to the field of lay ecclesial ministry, a form of church service where lay people work in our parishes and dioceses. Many go on to serve in Youth and Young Adult Ministry, but also other roles including Catholic education, liturgy and music ministry, social justice, and the diaconate. We have found that WYD plays a major factor in the discernment process of all these roles, and now plays a role in the continued work of the Catholic Church in the U.S. In particular, I'd like to touch on **three major areas of impact** of WYD in the United States which we can already see bearing fruit in our young people only a few months from our experience in Rio.

EVANGELIZATION

The makeup of our country's delegation to the 2013 World Youth Day in Rio was quite different than it has been in previous years. Over the past 20 years, the U.S. has sent a significant number of high school teens to the international gathering; however, this year, the U.S. had a majority audience of young adults in their early to mid-20s. About 82% of our pilgrims were comprised of these young adults. We also had a greater number of Hispanic young people attend, reflecting the greater diversity of young people in our country.

These trends are important for us because WYD is having more of an impact in our dioceses' and parishes' outreach to Hispanics and young adults in college and in their 20s and 30s than ever before. Youth Ministry (that is, our nation's outreach to 13-18 year olds) has generally benefited from the World Youth Day experience in the U.S. since 1993 – and continues to benefit the good work of our National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM), which gathers 25,000 young people every other year for a national youth conference and around 3,500 adults for a biennial ministry formation conference. However, with the increase of young adults at this year's WYD, we foresee greater emphasis across our country on evangelizing young adult men and women in our parishes, dioceses, and movements, especially in those moments of transition between high school and young adulthood. In the past, this emphasis has not been as strong as our outreach to youth – and we look at this change in direction as an opportunity for more evangelization among those in their 20s and 30s.



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In a very specific way, our Bishops Conference, through its Secretariat on Laity, Marriage, Family Life, and Youth, is looking into ways to keep connected with adults who have experienced WYD in the past. For lack of a better term, we are exploring the idea of an "alumni network" of World Youth Day participants. In the short term, this will increase our sense of continuity from one WYD to the next; in the long term, this could help the Church engage adults who have this shared experience of faith. Over the years, some of these men and women who welcomed the Holy Father and proclaimed their enthusiasm for the Church and the Gospel at WYD have now drifted from and disengaged from the practice of the faith. Our hope is that we can find creative ways to reach out to them – and build upon this pilgrimage and phenomenon in their lives so that they might become more integrated into the Catholic community in the United States and around the world.

And with the wave of immigration that has impacted the population of the United States, and in particular the Catholic Church in our country, the large presence of Latino pilgrims from the U.S. at a World Youth Day will certainly impact the way we do ministry in the United States. For us, these two milestones comprise a major turning point in the history of our participation with WYD – as these groups have not been as engaged as they were in Rio. We look forward to what the future holds.

SOCIAL MEDIA

One could argue that, even though our U.S. delegation who traveled to Rio was one-third of our number we had in Madrid, 2013 saw the most U.S. young people actually participating in a World Youth Day, albeit *digitally*. More than in previous years, this year's influx of "digital pilgrims" was due to the increasing usage of social media among young people and a greater number of our dioceses that hosted stateside celebrations (with some video or digital hook ups to those in Rio) for those who were not able to travel overseas. Over 700,000 people were reached during World Youth Day through our bishops' conference social media pages,

with 35,000 actively engaged during the last week of July 2013 in the USCCB's World Youth Day posts. This does not even count the countless others who participated via television or streaming webcasts of WYD events and through other social media pages. This means that social media and instant communications have allowed a new sense of solidarity between the pilgrim who gets on an airplane to attend the international celebration with the Pope – and the pilgrim who participates in the events in their home country. In some cases, the technology even allows live dialogue between those groups, making WYD an even more universal or “catholic in its approach and ministry to young people.

Now the pilgrim who participates digitally is just as invested in the WYD phenomenon as the one who stands among the millions on Copacabana Beach or each Palm Sunday in St. Peter's Square. So the question remains: what does this new age of digital pilgrimage mean for the future of World Youth Day when so many young people are experiencing this event in very new and innovative ways? It is a question the United States wrestles with, and one you may wrestle with, too.

PAPAL “FEVER”

WYD had quite an impact on the country's appreciation of Pope Francis and the challenges he has offered us. As you may know, secular media and the entertainment industry of the U.S. have been smitten by the Holy Father. Pope Francis was named *TIME* magazine's “Person of the Year,” and, perhaps even more impressively for young people, was on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine, a clear indication of what's “hot” today.

In particular, and perhaps as so many more young people participated via social media and because we live in such a media-heightened world, his words in Rio went *beyond* Copacabana Beach and beyond active Catholics. Phrases like “Go make a mess, go make some noise” have been taken to heart by many young people of America. Pope Francis' challenge to “go to the fringes” to “be revolutionaries and swim against the tide,” and to “not water down the faith” resound in with younger generations of all religious and cultural backgrounds. His actions, such as visiting the favela on his way to WYD, inspired young people to venture into the poverty-stricken areas of their own country and minister on the margins. For the Church, this has also inspired our leaders to develop more ministries around service, justice, and advocacy for the poor and marginalized. Catholic and non-Catholic young people alike are paying attention to the faith because they feel a sense of love, compassion, and forgiveness exuding from the Church, led by the Holy Father. More and more of our young pilgrims are now engaged in conversations with their peers who are distant, hurt by, or alienated from the Catholic community. Pope Francis has opened those doors for them – and allowed greater dialogue and compassionate and merciful evangelization with the disenfranchised and disaffected.

In conclusion, over the past 21 years in the United States, we have come to realize that World Youth Day is not just an event that happens every two or three years in a foreign country. Rather, World Youth Day has truly become a phenomenon that takes on even more significance in today's digital, socially-networked age. Over the years, World Youth Day has made our young people more globally-minded, and less parochial. They see themselves as members of a truly universal and “catholic” community – and that they not alone. As we live in a global age where so many young people are transitory and on the move (from job to job, from home to home). We offer youth and young adults a “WYD Church” that exists beyond the walls of the local parish or diocese – and this is crucial to our ministry with them. The Catholic Church is one that travels with these men and women, wherever they go. In a sense, the Holy Father is their pastor – and Catholics in every country are their fellow parishioners. As you can see, WYD has played and will continue to play an important role for the Church in the United States. We are blessed with many resources and large numbers, but there is still much room for growth. Just as you might look to us for cooperation, resources, and support, we look to the rest of the world to learn from your experiences and expertise with young people – and together, we must pray that it continues to bear much fruit for all our countries. Thank you for this opportunity to share these thoughts with you. God bless you all.