

Following on from the last editions of e-News where we featured stories from pilgrims who attended WYD 2016 we bring you two more accounts of the experience of WYD. We feature recollections from Rachael O'Connor from Timboon and Caitee Andrew from Ballarat. In the next edition we will end our WYD experience with reflections from Aloisia Mafi from Mildura and Chloe Mason from ACU Ballarat. Something to look forward to.

RACHAEL O'CONNOR, FROM SCOTTS CREEK IN THE PARISH OF TIMBOON:

Hello everyone. I had the privilege to go to my first World Youth Day which was held in Krakow, Poland. It was the most unbelievable experience I have had in my faith journey.

We flew from Melbourne on July 16 arriving at midday in Rome on July 17. We spent that afternoon settling into our accommodation as we had a big day ahead of us the next day. We woke up early as we had Mass in front of the tomb of St Peter which was underneath the Basilica. It was a great experience!

After this we had free time to explore the Basilica as it is enormous! The height of the Basilica stands at 132m. Everything was detailed with the marbled floors and the ceiling was decked in gold. It looks great now that I can hardly imagine what it was like five hundred years ago! We saw Michelangelo's statue "The Pieta" (which is a sculpture of Mary holding Jesus' body in her arms) and we also had the chance to pray in front of the tomb of St John Paul II.



We then visited Palatine Hill to see the ancient ruins of Rome, the Arch of Constantine and the Colosseum. Later that afternoon we visited the Sistine Chapel and the Vatican Museum where they keep many sculptures and artefacts. We witnessed tapestries that were over five hundred years old and many of them had gold threads woven through. There were many ceiling paintings by Michelangelo, like "The Last Judgement", which is painted in the Sistine Chapel where Conclaves are held.

On July 19 we travelled to Assisi, the birthplace of St Francis. It is a beautiful town situated on a mountainside. Mass was celebrated in the lower part of the village in the Santa Maria Basilica which was built around the monastery where St Francis served his time as a Monk.

On July 20, we drove into the village of Assisi and celebrated Mass in St Francis Basilica and afterwards we witnessed the alfresco painting from the 12th century. Underneath the Basilica they had the crypts of St Francis and St Clare and their artefacts. We also visited the Basilica of St Clare and the San Damiano Shrine where St Francis heard the voice of Christ and wrote the Canticle of the Creatures.

We arrived in Warsaw on July 21. During our stay here Mass was celebrated in the Church of St John and we visited the crypts of the past leaders and clergy of Poland. We also got to see a little pop-up museum of St John Paul II. After lunch we drove to Czestochowa where we visited Jasna-Gora, the site of the black Madonna, and we got a chance to pray.

On July 23 we visited Auschwitz and Birkenau Concentration Camps. They had panels set up around the camps so we learnt of the horrors behind Auschwitz. We also heard inspirational stories. One that was quite special was the story of St Maximilian Kolbe, Polish Franciscan Friar, who volunteered to die so that he could save another prisoners life. More than one and a half million people were killed during the Holocaust.

“FOR EVER LET THIS PLACE BE A CRY OF DESPAIR AND A WARNING TO HUMANITY, WHERE THE NAZIS MURDERED ONE AND A HALF MILLION MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN, MAINLY JEWS FROM VARIOUS COUNTRIES OF EUROPE”

AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU 1940-45

Later that afternoon we visited the Shrine of Divine Mercy in Krakow which was built in honour of St Faustina. Following this, on July 24 we visited St John Paul II's hometown in Wadowice, where they built a museum inside the house he grew up in. He was a very genuine man that loved the outdoors. One of our priests, Fr Tad (originally from Poland) took us on a tour around Krakow and we visited many churches, Wawel Castle and the place where Pope Francis stayed during WYD Week.

July 26 marked the beginning of WYD week which began with our Aussie gathering at Tauron Arena. Later that afternoon there was the Opening Mass. It was amazing to have so many young Catholics all over the world gathered to one celebration.



The next morning we had catechesis where an American Cardinal spoke to us about our faith. Later that night we walked to Tauron Arena where we had “A Night of Divine Mercy” and over 17,000 people attended this. It was an extraordinary experience and quite confronting.

On the following day we visited the other St John Paul II Museum situated behind the Shrine of Divine Mercy. The Museum held his uniform as Priest, Bishop, Archbishop and Pope. It also had portraits of him. Later that afternoon we finally got to meet the Pope! I really loved hearing his speeches and one line I particularly remember was “I worry when I see young people throw in the towel before the game has begun, who are defeated before they play, who walk around glumly as if life has no meaning. Deep down these people are bored... and boring!”

The next day we again had catechesis where we had an Australian Bishop speak to us and then that night we attended the Stations of the Cross, where at each Station there was someone painting or a trapeze artist.

On July 30 we walked to “Campus Misericordiae”. It was quite a tough walk, trekking over fifteen kilometres to our overnight Vigil. We arrived there in the afternoon. We had two people speak to us - the first was a woman overcoming her drug addiction and then a Syrian woman describing the horrors she faces at home and how many people are scared to leave their homes. Despite these horrors she sees God in the little things people do. Later into the night we were given candles and we shared an hour of silence. It was great to look around and see so many people, it made it feel quite special.

The next day we had our final Mass with Pope Francis. He told us the story of Zacchaeus and Jesus - how Zacchaeus had many obstacles to face before meeting Jesus - his point was that God loves all of us. At the end of the Mass the Pope announced the next WYD will be in Panama 2019. We then walked our way back to where we stayed.

We spent the next three days in Wisla on the border of Poland and flew from Vienna arriving in Melbourne on August 6.

CAITEE ANDREW, A TEACHER AT ST THOMAS MORE PRIMARY SCHOOL BALLARAT:

Wow! Where do I even begin? What an incredible experience!

Leaving Melbourne Airport on Monday, July 18 I was nervous, apprehensive and excited. I had no idea what to expect or what was in store for me. I hardly knew the fifty-two other 'Poland Encounter' pilgrims from Victoria but, over the three weeks, I formed some great friendships and shared many amazing experiences.

The Pilgrimage was split into three main parts - Days in the Diocese (Przemyśl), World Youth Day (Kraków) and a Victorian Retreat (Wisła).

Days in the Diocese - Przemyśl (Sher-mi-shul)

This small town, east of Krakow, with a population of about 60,000 people, hosted a range of pilgrims from all over the world. The purpose of this experience was to immerse us all into the culture and everyday life of the Polish people. I was extremely lucky to be placed with a beautiful Polish family who spoke great English. Throughout the week we attended many Masses, evangelisation sessions and evening concerts. I learnt some fabulous songs and dances from the very talented Fr Rob Galea (from Bendigo) and even found myself on stage a couple of times! The people of Przemyśl were so welcoming, friendly and so incredibly generous in every way possible. I truly felt at home with my host family.

World Youth Day Week - Kraków

Although it was sad leaving my beautiful host family, I was excited for the next part of the journey. Arriving in Kraków was so surreal. There were young people everywhere - waving flags, singing and chanting in their own languages and dancing in the streets. This week was jam packed - Masses, catechises sessions and presentations. My personal highlights of this week would include the Opening Mass where 1.5 million



people attended, the Papal Welcome ceremony, and the 15km pilgrimage to the site of the overnight Vigil where Mass was celebrated with Pope Francis the following day.

Victorian Retreat - Wisła

This final leg of the journey was spent in a small town in the mountains of Poland. Here we reflected on our World Youth Day experiences and reflected on how it had or will affect our lives at home.

Since returning to Ballarat I have loved sharing my experience with the students and teachers at the school where I am a teacher. I will be forever grateful for the support, encouragement and prayers of the whole St Thomas More School community, the support of the Catholic Education Office Ballarat and the Diocese. Thank you!