

CELEBRATING WORLD YOUTH DAY

Several St John of God caregivers joined hundreds of thousands of young pilgrims in Krakow, Poland, to celebrate World Youth Day. Led by St John of God Murdoch Hospital Deputy Director of Mission Michael Trainor, the caregivers say the experience was 'absolutely amazing.' "We started our journey by staying with host families that offered us hospitality in abundance," said St John of God Ballarat Hospital Clinical Nurse Specialist Ali Pickles. "It was amazing to learn about Polish family life and to become a part of the local parish."

The pilgrims followed in the footsteps of St John Paul II by staying in Kalvaria, the former Pope's favourite retreat in the Mountains, before travelling to Krakow for the World Youth Day Opening Mass. Festivities ran from 23 – 31 July and included Catechetical sessions, walking pilgrimages, music and an appearance from the Pope.

"What an experience, both spiritually and emotionally," said Ali. "We could not wait to come home and share our experience with you all." Read more about Ali's experience below.

Before attending the WYD pilgrimage I was reconnecting as a Catholic and I finished completing my sacraments at Easter 2016. I was baptised a Catholic but was brought up in Baptist faith attending Youth group and Sunday school. As I grew up, as a teenager, religion was uncool (in my eyes) and I completely stepped away from my faith. Some years later I attended the Australian Catholic University in Ballarat studying for my nursing degree and this re-engaged my curiosity about the Catholic faith. My belief in myself and concern about what others thought of me prevented me following this curiosity through. I have worked for St John of God Hospital for many years adhering to Catholic values and when I had children I found myself sure I wanted them to be brought up as Catholics. I baptised my three children in the Catholic faith and they attend school at St Thomas More Primary School. The more my children learnt about the Catholic faith, the more my need to follow my Catholic journey strengthened and I finally took the step late last year to finish my sacraments. This was the best decision as it has opened so many doors for me. The opportunity to travel to WYD came about as one of my sponsors is the Director of Mission at work, who felt I would learn so much from the WYD experience. I cannot comprehend how much I have learnt. Before I left I didn't even know how to pray the rosary!



Top: Ali pictured front
Bottom: Ali in red on the right

Many people talk about "God moments" on WYD. Beforehand I would have said "yeah right!" However there were a few "God moments" for me during the WYD experience. The Opening Mass was the first. It was overcast and looked like it was about to rain. As soon as Mass began the clouds parted and the sun's rays shone through onto the stage for the whole of Mass. It was such a beautiful moment. Another moment came from the retreat in Lichen Stary. Not only was this a beautiful place but also I felt so connected. I prayed more than I ever have and was surrounded by like-minded people who helped me grow in myself as a Catholic. I entered the retreat free of any angst I had previously carried before embarking on WYD.



Overall, the highlight of my WYD experience would have to be the time spent with the host families in Warsaw. I knew it would be fun as I have participated in an exchange as a student however this was unbelievable. My host family opened their doors to us and although they did not own much and were not wealthy, they treated us like royalty. They welcomed us like members of their own family and despite our language and cultural barriers we were brought together by faith. Without this experience we would not have experienced traditional Polish family life and culture.

The whole experience of WYD has changed me significantly. I am connected to some awesome people and have become close friends with a couple of young priests from Western Australia. We were some of the older ones in our group and we connected on many levels but most importantly spiritually. They have taught me so much and continue to answer my silly questions. For that I am very thankful. I now feel fully connected to my Catholic faith. I understand Mass, the prayers and I feel now I can fully participate.

Post WYD I want to get more involved with the Catholic community. Specifically helping in the youth ministry in my diocese. I will “get off the couch” as Pope Francis suggested. I would like to lead young people to the Australian Youth Festival in Sydney 2017 as well as be a leader for a youth group to the next WYD in Panama 2019.

Michaela Corrigan, a pilgrim from Ballarat speaks of her experience at World Youth Day:

On August 16 I boarded a plane along with fellow pilgrims, bound for Rome. Our group pilgrimage was called the John Paul II Trail, a reversal of Pope John Paul II’s journey from Krakow to the Vatican. My personal pilgrimage was the discovery of Divine Mercy.

When I was in my early 20’s I turned my back on the Church and what I saw as its outdated rules and regulations. With every passing day I stepped further away from Christ and lost a little more of my faith, until I reached the point where I began to doubt the very existence of God. I was deeply unhappy and unfulfilled by my secular lifestyle and eventually, after many years, I began a slow and painful journey back to the Church.



I started to attend Mass again, but I felt out of place sitting in the congregation. In the time that I’d been away changes had been made, the prayers I knew so well now had different words and the responses had also changed. I felt conspicuous, as though everyone in the Church could see that I had no idea what I was doing. I was afraid that they all knew my ugly truth, that I didn’t belong and had no right to be there. I would leave ashamed and disheartened and each time it would take me weeks to build up the courage to come back again.

I went to youth group meetings, hoping to find acceptance with people closer to my age, but again I felt terrified that they would see through me and recognise the fraud; faithless and lost. When I heard about WYD I saw it as my last-ditch effort to find my way back to the Church. As I began preparing for the pilgrimage I started to feel the weight of my lifestyle during my years away from the Church. It had been eight years since my last confession and those eight years had become a physical weight that sat heavily on my heart. I couldn’t bear the thought of carrying that weight with me on the pilgrimage. I needed to go to reconciliation. I poured my soul out and at the end my parish priest explained to me that our faith is one of great joy and now I would be open to experiencing the joy of Christ’s Mercy for myself.

I left feeling relieved and at peace, the unbearable weight had lifted, but there was no joy. I realised that it had been many years since I had felt any joy in my life. So I began my pilgrimage absolved but still seeking acceptance.

Until we reached Czestochowa and attended Mass near the shrine of Our Lady of Jasna Góra. After receiving communion, I knelt to pray, looking up at the massive crucifix above the altar and was filled with shame. I had turned my back on Christ, I didn't deserve His Mercy. To the left of the altar was an image of the Black Madonna, I prayed for her to bring me closer to her son. As I prayed I was filled with the most incredible feeling of love, Mary's love for me. Stronger than anything I had ever experienced in my life and with it finally came the joy I had been missing for so long.

I overflowed with joy and I couldn't help sharing it with my fellow pilgrims along the rest of our journey. And as we shared experiences, laughed, explored and prayed my joy grew. This amazing bunch of forty-two young people and three incredible chaplains were my friends, my family, my community. For the first time I felt like I truly belonged, not just to my little pilgrimage group but to Christ's Church.