

World Youth Day

Jemma Sinclair recalls the effect of her first World Youth Day in Cologne in the summer of 2005. World Youth Day will be held in Lisbon this year.



As I reflect on my time at World Youth Day (WYD) as a now thirty-seven-year-old woman, in some ways, I hardly recognise the person I was; in other ways, I can see that the foundations of who I am now were laid during that summer in 2005. I was a nineteen-year-old Mater Dei student from Ballymun, a baptised, non-practising Catholic who, through a series of fortunate encounters, joined a choir that sang during an evening Mass each Sunday. Naturally,

we were an ideal crowd to take along to WYD. I hadn't travelled much at the time, so the idea of a thirty-nine-hour bus and ferry trip across Europe and into Germany thrilled me. I'm not sure I'd be as enthusiastic now! In all honesty, I didn't know what to expect. Coming from a non-practising family, I had very little experience with prayer or worship of any kind. My retreat participation was only in its infancy, and my experience of faith was just one

Pope's Intention: We pray the World Youth Day in Lisbon will help young people to live and witness the Gospel in their own lives.

year young. What I did know, however, was that the people who were encouraging me to go were people of faith and people of fun – a good combination in my opinion.

It is hard to put into words the impact that WYD had on me. I remember attending many workshops on social justice, seminars on prayer and discussions about the life of the Church. I can recall very little information about these events, but I can very much connect with the feeling I had during and after taking part – a feeling that I was a part of something bigger and that something bigger was guiding me. I was in a lived-faith community for probably the very first time in my life and the message was simple: keep doing good. For someone who had struggled with finding the right direction in life, this was just the message I needed to keep me on the right path.

Almost all our choir and many of our friends from the congregation attended WYD together. As you can imagine, there was plenty of singing, chanting, and dancing. I vividly remember us being in an underground train station, tricolour of Ireland on one side of the tracks and the tricolour of the equally loud and equally enthusiastic Italian contingent on the other. Our choir director had somehow managed to

teach the Italians one of our simple, lively call-and-response songs. We blared out our parts with the vibrancy and energy of youth who were fully alive. Not even passing trains could interrupt our incredibly joyful cacophony. If I remember correctly, both sides ignored their train on several occasions to allow this incredible moment to linger a little longer. My ears still held the melody, and my heart held the exhilaration late into the night as I wrapped up in my sleeping bag on the floor of our school accommodation.

Capturing what WYD meant to me is a challenge. It is something that needs to be a lived experience. I would love for everyone to have the experience of community, welcome and inclusion that I felt so deeply that summer. It has supported me in growing a faith that has served me so well throughout my life and one that I now pass on to my own children and the children I am fortunate to work with. I think the most important thing that WYD opened up for me was to give myself permission to seek out what is good, to become a person of lived faith and to celebrate the moments of joy in life whether faith filled or otherwise.

Pope Francis encourages those going to WYD 2023 in Lisbon to 'Prepare yourselves with that enthusiasm. Have hope, because one grows a lot at an event like WYD. You may not realize it yet. But the young people can expect to discover wonderful new things as you meet people from other parts of the world and build relationships founded on common values.'

WYD Lisbon already has more than 500,000 participants registered for the event, and at least 193 countries will be represented.