

World Youth Day – a life changing experience for one young man

An inspirational Sydney youth speaks of his life-changing WYD experience

By John Fernando

It's been nearly three years since thousands of young people descended upon Sydney from across the world for World Youth Day 2008.

The next World Youth Day 2011 in Madrid is just around the corner and is essential for any young Catholic seeking to deepen their faith, find meaning in their lives and encountering God in a unique and powerful way.

Many young Australians who took part in the festivities in Sydney three years ago will be jetting off to Spain to once again celebrate their faith amongst fellow Catholics and spiritual searchers alike.

"The Sydney 2008 World Youth Day changed my life," says Joe Comerford from Sydney, who was amongst the crowd in Sydney and will be journeying to Madrid. "Its positive impact has brought me to a place where my faith has deepened and...is now active and strong."

The 20-year-old, from the Sacred Heart Parish in Mona Vale says "The spiritual and emotional power [of World Youth Day Sydney] was immense."

"I had seen pilgrimages, like Haj, on television, where thousands of people go to worship. But Sydney 2008 World Youth Day was something else."

Joe was brought up in a Catholic family. Both his parents are school principals and his father was once a fully ordained Catholic priest. Joe emphasizes the powerful and positive influence that his parents have had on his faith.

"My parents are my role models," he says. "They have enriched my life with the wonderful gift of my Christian faith, which I now cherish."

"Prior to World Youth Day 2008, I was quite a lazy, uninspired kind of person" Joe says. "The past three years since the last World Youth Day has been amazing." Inspired by his new found faith, Joe decided to skip the traditional 'schoolies' week when he finished Year 12 and go on a missionary journey to Cambodia where he and several other Australians helped build homes for poor villagers. He says he wanted to do something more meaningful than going off to party and get drunk.

"My experience in Cambodia was out of this world. It has taught me much and was incredibly rewarding."

Joe now studies Visual Arts and Theology at the Australian Catholic University (ACU). He is also actively involved as a youth coordinator and music minister.

He plays in a group called *Soul Band* who is slated to play at World Youth Day this year in Madrid.

“I am certainly looking forward to the World Youth Day in Madrid. I think every young person should experience the awesome love of God and the friendship of other similar people through a massive and positive event like this.”

Joe will also be using his trip to Spain to visit some of the friends he made in Sydney in 2008 “I made some awesome friends from Bosnia, Austria, Germany and Croatia.” He says. “I hope to go to these countries after this year’s World Youth Day and spend as much time in those four countries, and possibly Italy and see Rome and some of the other historic and fascinating places in Italy.”

Joe says that World Youth Day has shown him how “amazingly beautiful, wonderful and valid our Church is in these modern times” despite the Church facing so much bad press in recent years.

“The most memorable moments from Sydney 2008 was the first day, with the young man carrying the cross in procession, and also seeing the Holy Father” he says. “And the final mass at the racecourse was just fantastic. Even though we were tired, we had energy and enthusiasm to truly participate and enjoy the service.”

Joe continues to thrive off the spiritual momentum he gained three years ago. Since his World Youth Day experience he has developed the ability to appreciate and love his fellow human beings in the here and now. Joe considers his lecturers at the ACU and his fellow youth coordinators at his parish to be people who inspire him to greater things. Even when his daily life is busy with its usual ebb and flow, he always tries to find ways of expressing his love and respect for those people in his life.

“For me, my faith is encapsulated in the words from the Epistle of Saint James, which says ‘Faith without works is dead’”, he said. “I firmly believe something as powerful and unique as the World Youth Day can light a fire in us that will hold us in good stead for all our lives. It centres us and gives us the fresh perspective on life in which to take on any challenge or burden.”

“If you haven’t been to a World Youth Day or wasn’t considering on going, I would sincerely urge you to give it a try. It is a small investment in your time and money, which will reap huge rewards and benefits for the rest of your life, and the lives of others around you.”

For information on WYD Madrid, please contact your diocesan office, or call 1300 623 743 or visit www.wydtours.com