

World Youth Day: A diary

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Wednesday, Aug. 11, 3:50 p.m.: The third flight of our group has gathered at the airport. The airline agent just announced that our plane is on the way, but that we'll be an hour late leaving. No one seems to mind that too much. That's good because I expect that this won't be the last time we'll have to wait this week.

The joy in this delay is the presence of this group and the chance to soak up the enthusiasm of the kids — and their parents. As I peck away at my computer, little Patrick Grimmer keeps me supplied with M and M's. He's a generous guy. Five years old, I think.

I wonder what questions, concerns, interests and enthusiasms the kids are bringing with them. I know they'll be blessed in the events of these days. My curiosity is how and through whom? What will surprise them, and what will disappoint them? And in what ways will the Lord deepen their sense of how good they are? It will be a beautiful experience to watch it all happen between now and Monday.

Patrick just came back with his beautiful sister, Madeleine. I met her just a few moments ago, but Patrick wanted to be sure I knew that Madeleine and he are twins!

11:00 Denver: We finally took off better than an hour late and had to hold for a while before being cleared for landing in Denver. Good flight. I sat with Doug Della Pietra, one of our seminarians who is doing his pastoral service year with our communities in Corning and Painted Post, and with Danny Doyle from St. Michael's, Penn Yan.

When we arrived, I went to the bishops' headquarters to register and to receive appropriate credentials from the Secret Service.

First impressions: the people here are most welcoming; the young people are in great spirits. I know it was a delight to spend the day with part of our group. Travel days can be tedious. This day held some unavoidable snags, but it was not tedious.

I'm glad I made the option to stay with our group rather than with the bishops at their hotel. There would be logistical problems either way, but this choice will allow much more time with the kids.

Thursday, Aug. 12, 8 a.m.: After breakfast by the pool, we're off to the heart of town for the day's activities. All seem lively this morning. The group from Assumption, Fairport, is all rigged out in multi-colored caps with propellers on them. They're great for conversation, identification.

10 a.m.: We gather in Mile High Stadium. I'm tagging along with the group from Christ the King in Irondequoit. Weather is spectacular. Warm, breezy, glorious sky. The morning is filled with song, good talks. It's interesting to watch the kids warm up to it all. I don't ever remember being with so many young people in one place at one time. They start "the wave." It roars around Mile High several times and then fades. There are some in Denver who want to bring their message home; one hired a plane to circle the stadium trailing the message: "World Youth Use Birth Control." The liturgy is wonderful. Presider: Bishop Norbert Dorsey of Orlando, Florida.

12:30 p.m.: Lunch. The only unpleasant moment so far. Food stands are set up outside the stadium. But there is not enough room to accommodate so many, and little care has been taken for crowd control or to establish service lanes. Thank God, no one was hurt. In all of the confusion I didn't observe a single instance of rudeness. Remarkable.

2:30 p.m.: We stand in line to enter Mile High for the pope's arrival. For the next three and a half hours we share the celebration: watching the people gather, sharing in the music and song. Themes: Music from the Nations, Rhythms of the World. All through the hours, in rain and in shine the music, cheers and dance continue. It's wonderful.

5:50 p.m.: Five huge helicopters, one of which carries John Paul II, swoop down and land just outside the stadium. The crowd roars as we follow the activity on the huge stadium video screen.

6 p.m.: Pope John Paul II enters the stadium. The kids explode! Several welcoming speeches. JP II: I love you. Live in the love of God and enjoy unassailable happiness. Share the gospel message of life and love with others. Later, I welcome the opportunity to debrief over supper with Fathers Bill Gordinier and Dan Condon, Michelle Szczesiak, Charles Kellett and Jason Outhouse.

Friday, Aug. 13, 6:30 a.m.: A great run with Betsy Hogan and Chris Hurley from Nativity, Brockport. They are bright, athletic, graceful and very kind. It seemed to me that their feet never touched the



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ground while they ran.

9:10 a.m.: Arrive at McNichol's Arena for a morning-long session similar to the one at Mile High yesterday. But this one is in the Spanish language, and I accompany our group from Mt. Carmel, Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Michael's and Corpus Christi. It's warm and wonderful and full of life. Much rhythm, music and motion. Too much air conditioning. It's a good thing we moved a lot.

1:30 p.m.: Lunch arrangement much improved today. We don't linger because we have a long walk to a meeting of all of the group from our diocese. Meeting spaces all over the city have been assigned for that purpose. Thanks to Carlos Vargas, our intrepid guide, we make the meeting just in time. The space is too small for our numbers, but our group once again demonstrates flexibility. They deal with four questions in small groups, following that they give summary reports to all of us.

Their questions are: 1) How do I feel about my place in the church? 2) What can we do to strengthen our community, our participation in it? 3) What are the strong gifts young people bring to our communities? and 4) What can I bring back to my parish from World Youth Day?

The kids do a good job in their presentations, and then I have a chance briefly to comment on what I have heard. The session is good-spirited, festive, charged with energy. I don't know where they get all of it. At the end, the Assumption group gives me one of their propeller hats and a skateboard. I love the hat. At this stage of my life I can't warm up to the skateboard! It will be put to good use, but not by me.

5:30 p.m.: When we finish we have time to walk around the Celebration Plaza to enjoy the exhibits, purchase souvenirs, eat, etc. I do that until 7:30 when we board the first bus for home. A large group opted for a trip to a mall for shopping and/or a movie.

8:30 p.m.: Stop a few doors down from the motel for some supper. The delegates from Mother of Sorrows kindly invite me to join them and even make recommendations about what's good. Father David Faraone, Dave Barry, Jen Consler, Mark De Neve, Jeff Gontarek, Anthony Uttaro, Cheryl Feeley and I consume tons of chicken and ribs, gallons of lemonade.

Saturday, Aug. 14, 6:30 a.m.: Colleen Vogt, Andrea Spall and Cara Crosby from St. Columba's, Caledonia, and Matt McClaren of St. Charles, Greece, and I do a half-hour run together. I'm glad they're willing to tell me about themselves because I can't keep up with them and talk, too. We had some fun with Matt. He didn't show up on time and the girls had to rouse him.

Afternoon: We start out for Cherry Creek State Park. We bus to a staging area, then join thousands of brothers and sisters in a three-mile walk to the park. Nora Bradbury-Haehl plays the guitar, and the kids sing as we walk. The convergence of groups is like streams flowing into an ever-growing river.

The night: I've never seen anything quite like it. Tens of thousands of kids fill a vast mountain field. Early signs indicate that space will be at a premium, and that's the case. When bed rolls are spread, there is no room left for footpaths within group areas. It's unparalleled togetherness!

I walk around the area. Young people from all parts of our country and many parts of the world greeting one another in the warm sun. A group of dancers from Taipei portraying the raising of Lazarus ... story tellers ... singers who get us to sing with them and dance. They tell us to "tweak a cheek," "bump a rump."

A walk to the stage, which is the focal center of

activities at the park, to test my credentials because I hope to join the bishops for the Mass tomorrow and I won't be traveling with them. I'm wearing shorts and the propeller hat. The credentials work. And the Secret Service Agents don't bat an eye at the hat.

John Paul II arrives at 7:30. Great excitement. Music by Colorado Symphony, chorus and children's chorus. Conductor is conductor emeritus of Krakow Symphony, where JP II served before his election as pope. Mike Theisen and I try to get as close as we can. Good spot, but we couldn't shift our feet for two hours. Crowd patient, friendly. Mild exceptions come when people obstruct view of others by holding banners up too long or carrying someone on their shoulders.

Several young people from around the world give personal testimony. Some of it quite moving: two young men from Bosnia, one from New York. The latter explains that his dad stood by him all his life in the boy's struggle with cerebral palsy. Now he cares for his dad.

Mike and I return to our group's area. I'll never forget the sight. A sea of bed rolls. Hardly a patch of earth to be seen. I long to lie down and do. I close my eyes and listen to the sounds of the night. Music in the distance. Laughter everywhere. There's a card game going on three feet to my left and a conversation two feet to my right. When I move a muscle, I bump someone. If anyone near me stirs, I feel it. That's how close we are. Really.

Finally, I sleep. At least I think I do. But it's in short bursts and I wake up when someone bumps me or laughs or I begin to ache too much in one position.

They tell me I became the subject of photographs while I was sleeping. I'm not sure if they're kidding. But, if they're not, I'm sure I'll find out eventually. Good sleep comes at 2:30. Reveille comes three hours later. Yes.

Sunday, Aug. 15: I arrive at the staging area for the bishops. Long wait because of security requirements. But it's pleasant. Bishop Howard Hubbard and I have a reunion and meet lots of other friends. The liturgy is wonderful. If I could alter it at all, I would lessen the number of talks (testimonies, greeting etc.). Increase and enliven the music. The Holy Father was warm, gracious and most encouraging of all present.

Leaving the park was demanding. It was a long hot walk after a beautiful but very warm, long morning. Many, including some in our group, needed treatment for dehydration and fatigue; other health problems. Even in that kind of stress, there was very little negativity. And what little there was served to highlight once again the extraordinary spirit that characterized the whole trip.

I hate to stop writing because the memories keep coming. But we're not far from home and will be landing soon. Let me conclude with some words of thanks to:

- all who supported the kids in any way in their preparations for World Youth Day: pastors and parish communities, parents and families, everyone.
- parish leaders and chaperons who came to Denver and interacted with the kids with such respect and affection. You really inspired me.
- Maribeth Mancini, Mike Theisen, Mary Britton and Mary Ellen Fitzgibbons from our diocesan staff who had the enormous responsibility of leading us through this whole experience. They did so with a generosity that reached beyond exhaustion and a kindness that never surrendered to tension. For me they embodied all that's best in ministry.
- the young men and women who traveled to Denver from the Diocese of Rochester. They are remarkable people. We old timers may be a bit weary on this return journey, but I know that we are exhilarated. That's because we received so much from the kids whose beautiful company we shared during these special days. I wish I had the time and space to tell all of the stories, name all of the names. Like Mark Carpenter from St. Mary's, Rochester, who lent me a strap with which to secure my sleeping bag. And Brad Pesarek from St. Ann's, Palmyra, who traded hats with me. And Caroline Curtin from St. Patrick's, Elmira, who gave me an emergency poncho when the rains came heavy. And Georgia Jones from St. Patrick's, Victor, who shared with me some of her dreams for the future as we rode back to the hotel yesterday. And so many more.

Thanks so much for reading this. I hope you'll be hearing from some of the "Denver Kids" in the days ahead. They have a lot to tell.

Peace to all.