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Karen Franz/Catholic Courier

Father Rosica with staff and volunteers.

Canada

Continued from page 1

Should the pope attend World Youth Day 2002 as planned, it will mark his first return to the Canadian city that he also visited in 1984. It is the closest that any pope has ever come to Rochester.

The excitement is already building in Toronto, where a one-year countdown celebration is due to take place Saturday, July 28, at Nathan Phillips Square. The rally will include musical performances, video footage of previous World Youth Days, and a concluding candlelight vigil.

At a ninth-floor set of offices on Yonge Street, preparation for World Youth Day 2002 is obviously in full swing.

A group of nearly 50 young-adult volunteers spend their weekdays, along with Father Rosica, in an enthusiastic flurry of meetings, phone calls and computer work. These young Catholics assist in such areas as business and finance; computer services; language translation; and hospitality.

Nicholas Fortin, 20, assistant director of volunteers, said he's amazed by interest in World Youth Day from around the globe. "I have e-mail coming from France, Italy, Poland, Germany, South America, the Philippines," he said.

Meanwhile, Rima Hbeika, who was born in Lebanon and grew up in Montreal, helps coordinate World Youth Day registration from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Catholic Palestine and Jordan. Hbeika, 24, speaks Arabic, French and English; Fortin speaks French, English and Italian.

Patrick Gleeson, 26, who lives near Toronto, assists with accommodations. He said his main thrust is to place World Youth Day participants with host families across southern Ontario. Hotel reservations for World Youth Day — even as far away as Buffalo — have already become scarce, he said. "Hotels are a really insignificant part of my job, because there aren't that many," he remarked.

As the year goes on, Father Rosica said, the volume of volunteers and office space will grow substantially. Some workers will come from the Rochester Diocese, serving internships of at least four weeks. In return, World Youth Day will provide rooming, meals and transportation.

"We are looking always for volunteers," Fortin said.

Father Rosica insists that his volunteer employees be in the same age range as other World Youth Day participants. "I want this to be a project for young people, by young people — to give them an opportunity to shine," he commented. Gleeson, for one, said he's excited about volunteering because he has "so much responsibility with significant parts of the event."

A number of the volunteers have signed on for full-time duty right through the con-

clusion of World Youth Day next year. They're mostly Canadian young-adult Catholics who were hand-picked by Father Rosica. Fortin, a resident of Quebec City, said he was inspired to make a one-year commitment after receiving a spiritual message last year.

"I met God. I didn't see a person in the clouds, with bells and a lot of music. He was just there. I felt God and I understand I had a mission," Fortin said.

Kirsten Banga, 23, and her brother Mark, 22, are also on board for the whole year. Kirsten, who just graduated in May from the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, is applying her finance and accounting skills at the World Youth Day office. Though she had a chance to begin a paid position in her field, she instead found herself in Toronto.

"There was a voice in the back of my mind saying 'You're really missing out on a tremendous opportunity, and are never going to have this chance again,'" Banga explained.

Amid the hub of activity, the entire office staff breaks every day before lunchtime so Father Rosica can celebrate Mass in one of the meeting rooms. Hbeika said she prefers this rather informal atmosphere over a more structured Catholic Church setting.

"If Jesus was here in 2001 and he saw this group, you can imagine that he'd like something like this easily — rather than (see us) stay trapped in a pattern," she commented.

A positive force

All across Canada, the World Youth Day message is being spread by the World Youth Day cross. This sacred object was presented by Italian youths to Father Rosica and a contingent of nearly 50 Canadian young adults in Rome on Palm Sunday, April 8, with Pope John Paul looking on. The large wooden cross will be transported throughout the country right up until next July, heading to shopping malls, youth detention centers and other places where young people may be congregated. It was originally presented by Pope John Paul to the youth of the world in 1984, and is entrusted to the host country one year prior to each World Youth Day.

Father Rosica views World Youth Day 2002 as "a very clear attempt to breathe life, once again, into the church of North America." Hbeika feels that the sheer volume of participants alone will bring this about.

"People need to hear from us and know there's still young people who believe in Jesus Christ," she said.

World Youth Day will consist of a series of keynote speakers, workshops, Masses, entertainment and other celebrations. The two major gathering venues will be Exhi-



bition Place and Downsview Park. The latter site will host an outdoor closing Mass on July 28 next year; it's the same park where Pope John Paul celebrated Mass during his 1984 visit. Participants, while in the Toronto area, will also take part in social service projects, such as aiding the sick and the poor, wherever they are staying.

In promoting the Canadian culture to visitors, World Youth Day organizers will make a special effort to highlight the country's native people. According to the Canadian Conference of National Bishops, Canada has approximately 900,000 "Native Canadians" — the equivalent term for Native Americans. About 55 percent of these people are Catholic and Father Rosica said many of their customs will be ingrained into the World Youth Day festivities.

Father Rosica said that World Youth Day will offer a "very explicit vocational element" — something he feels doesn't happen often enough today.

"Unless we're in people's face about this, it does no good," he remarked. "One of the tragic things of this generation is that people don't know (religious) sisters. I'm a priest because of the Sisters of St. Joseph."

World Youth Day 2002 will have a more mature focus than the 1993 event in Denver, Father Rosica said. Whereas World Youth Day 1993 had a significantly positive effect on ministry to adolescents in the Rochester Diocese, Bradbury-Haehl said she hopes Toronto will engender a similar outcome for young adults.

Banga said this focus on young-adult Catholics is vital because so many, such as herself, are too old for parish teen groups but may not feel comfortable in groups that attract mostly married and/or older adults.

"I'm 23 and I don't want to go do bake sales," she said. "There needs to be something more out there, instead of us having to dig for it."

Father Rosica said that Canadian authorities, also, seem to recognize the significance of this event. He noted that millions of dollars in grant money have already been earmarked toward World Youth Day, and that he's in constant dialogue with government officials.

"I'm relating to every level of the federal government," he said.

Support from Canadian Catholics has been overwhelming, Father Rosica added. Already, he said, 71 of the country's 72 Catholic dioceses have organized World Youth Day committees.

"What we're seeing in this country, it blows my mind," he said. "This is big-time, huge."

Another interesting aspect of World Youth Day, Father Rosica said, is the interest exhibited by Protestant churches.

How to get involved

For registration information on World Youth Day, contact either your parish or Nora Bradbury-Haehl at 1-800-388-7177, ext. 218 or bradbury-haehl@dcj.org. Bradbury-Haehl, the diocesan program specialist for youth and young adults, is also the contact for those wishing to explore volunteer opportunities prior to World Youth Day.

Due to the huge anticipated crowds, Father Thomas Rosica, chief organizer, stressed that people interested in attending World Youth Day should register through their diocese. It would be virtually impossible to gain access to events any other way, he said.

For more details about World Youth Day, check the official Web site at www.wyrd2002.org.

"The role of the other Christian denominations, has been unexpected, and most welcome," Father Rosica said, noting that 13 million of the country's 30 million residents are Catholic and another 13 million are Protestant, according to the most recent census taken in 1991.

"This will have a positive effect on Catholic youth and non-Catholic youth," Gleeson remarked. "If you're unified with people that way, what a positive force in society that will be."

Banga, who attended World Youth Day in 1993, said the enthusiasm next July will be infectious for all involved, from fallen-away Catholics to people who recite the rosary daily.

"When you get there, no matter what level you're at, you can't help but feel something. It's such a positive outpouring," Banga said.

Pontiff plans to attend

That positive outpouring is mainly due to the pioneering efforts of Pope John Paul, who in 1984 called for World Youth Sunday to be celebrated annually (World Youth Sunday is held on the last Sunday of each October in the United States) and for an international gathering to take place every two years.

The pontiff presided over the first World Youth Day in Rome in 1985, and has appeared at all subsequent World Youth Days in Buenos Aires, Santiago De Compostela, Czestochowa, Denver, Manila, Paris, and again in Rome.

Whether the pope will make it to Toronto is uncertain at this time. He will turn 82 next May and has slowed down noticeably in recent years.

Yet Father Rosica — who has visited Pope John Paul 12 times over the past two years — said the pontiff has repeatedly assured him that he plans to be in Toronto.

Father Rosica said it's obvious that young adults will plan for Toronto hoping to see the man who has endeared himself to young people through his devotion to World Youth Day.

"His presence goes well beyond words," Father Rosica said. "Whether you like it or not, John Paul II is an icon — in the best sense of the word. Young people are looking to him. He is the father they didn't know, the grandfather they didn't have."

Hbeika, who was part of Father Rosica's group in Rome on Palm Sunday, can attest to the power of Pope John Paul's presence.

"You look at his face and I never saw someone who can reflect so much love and kindness," she said.

With or without the pope, the World Youth Day's national director/CEO emphasized that the spiritual experience of World Youth Day will be worth every participant's while.

"World Youth Day is, first and foremost, a celebration of the Catholic faith. We're saying this is about the pope, but it's also about much more than just the pope," Father Rosica said. "I certainly hope John Paul II will be there. But even if he isn't, there will be a World Youth Day."