

WORLD & NATION

World Youth Day crowd may grow at last minute

By Carol Zimmermann
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Toronto, the Huron Indian word for meeting place, is about to live up to its name when hundreds of thousands of Catholic teens and young adults meet there July 23-28 for World Youth Day.

But not as many young people will be meeting in Canada's largest city as initially expected. As of July 8, 215,000 participants from more than 170 countries had registered for World Youth Day. The number is significantly lower than previous World Youth Day crowds, but one that organizers say could still increase right up until the last minute.

"It's not a low number if you think about it," said World Youth Day spokeswoman Christina Parsons, noting that of the 2 million who attended World Youth Day in Rome in 2000 and the more than 1 million at World Youth Day in Paris in 1997, many of those had not registered in advance.

She said she is confident that 750,000, as initially predicted, will attend the closing Mass July 28 with Pope John Paul II at Downsview Park, a former Canadian military base.

But Parsons acknowledged in a telephone interview with Catholic News Service that the current number of registered participants was "a bit lower from what we expected" and said several factors could have played a part.

For starters, not everyone believed that Pope John Paul, who initiated World Youth Day in 1984, would make it to the Toronto event because of his health, she said.

But the pope is scheduled to attend the festivities, arriving in Toronto July 23 and staying on a remote island for a few days before joining the youths for a welcoming

ceremony, prayer vigil and closing Mass.

Parsons also noted that the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks might have influenced the travel plans of many young people from around the world unwilling to pay the increased air fare or to simply travel.

For U.S. pilgrims, she said the clergy sexual-abuse scandal might have turned some against church-sponsored events.

"By and large this event comes in the middle of all that, and we need it more than ever," Parsons said.

Some who wanted to participate in World Youth Day, including more than 400 Ugandans, will not be able to because they were denied visas by the Canadian government. So far, about 3,000 visa applications have been rejected on grounds of missing paperwork. Applicants who were granted visas had their standard fees waived by the Canadian government.

Parsons said she could not comment specifically on the visa trouble, but said she was aware that some have had difficulties.

"Are they legitimate pilgrims? Probably. But that's not our decision," she said. "We have to trust that the government is making the decision with the best intention."

The U.S. consulate is setting up an office at World Youth Day to help those with any difficulties.

By July 8, more than 52,000 young people from the United States planned to attend. Many of those teens are part of more than 2,000 registered groups.

Many are also coming for the pre-World Youth Day activities known as Days in the Dioceses, where pilgrims stay with a host family or local parish for a few days outside of Toronto to experience the local culture and develop friendships on a much smaller scale than at World Youth Day events.

For many, those days leading up to



Bill Wittman/CNS

Catholic young people carry the World Youth Day cross into downtown Toronto June 9 on the final leg of a journey through Canada. Toronto hosts the international gathering of Catholic youths, with Pope John Paul II celebrating the closing vigil and Mass July 27 and 28.

World Youth Day become the highlight of the trip, said Ana Villamil, associate director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth.

The cost of participating in the July 18-21 Days in the Dioceses are taken up by the host parishes or families.

Once pilgrims set foot in Toronto, they will have a lot to keep them busy. An opening Mass will be celebrated July 23, and the sacrament of reconciliation will be available.

From July 24-26 participants can attend catechetical sessions led by bishops at various venues in the city, work on service projects or attend an ongoing youth festival and youth forums at World Youth Day cafes.

Pilgrims will welcome Pope John Paul the evening of July 25. The next night they will participate in the Way of the Cross. On July 27 the youths will walk to Downsview Park where they will join the pope for an evening prayer vigil.

After spending the night there, pilgrims will join the pope for a closing Mass.

Officials initially expected the event to cost about \$80 million with registration fees offsetting \$50 million if 350,000 people attended. Individual and corporate sponsorship, government loans and grants, merchandise sales and collection from Canadian parishes were to cover other costs. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops is assuming responsibility for any deficit.



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Floods hit Texas parishes

SAN ANTONIO (CNS) — Catholics in the San Antonio area of south central Texas and their fellow residents were coping with flooding resulting from rainstorms that drenched the region between June 30 and the July 4th weekend.

The flooding led to the deaths of nine people and the evacuation of thousands.

By July 7, Texas Gov. Rick Perry had asked President Bush to declare at least 30 counties eligible for federal disaster relief; about 24 have been officially declared disaster areas. Perry has estimated that property losses might be close to \$1 billion.

City officials, social service agencies and the Federal Emergency Management Agency first provided emergency services in the San Antonio neighborhood near the Catholic chancery on the city's west side.

South Texas Catholics, like others, both needed help and provided it.

Responding quickly to calls for help were members of SS. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, a parish of 2,300 families in New Braunfels, northeast of San Antonio. They had confronted a similar flood in 1998.

Parishioner Allen Seelhammer said that at about 4:30 a.m. July 4, church members first heard the news of the city's planned

evacuation of several neighborhoods and organized crews to help residents. "We evacuated about 25 people," he said, adding that they also moved the residents' household goods out of their homes to store them temporarily in the parish gym.

"We got about 150 to 160 volunteers that reacted to this thing. We don't even think that's exceptional," he said. "We're proactive rather than reactive because we've been through it."

Seelhammer said his parish raised funds to help flood victims and planned to work with volunteers from two other Catholic churches in the town, Our Lady of Perpetual Help and Holy Family, to collect and distribute donations for flood victims.

In Kerrville, northwest of San Antonio, members of Notre Dame Parish also witnessed considerable flooding. Father Joseph Mendivelso, parochial vicar of the parish of more than 2,000 families, told CNS that "the problem is very big."

"Many people have lost their houses, especially poor people living close to the Guadalupe River and little rivers within the town," he said. Many parishioners, including those in the St. Vincent de Paul Society, were volunteering to help, he added.

Those in rural farm communities south of San Antonio experienced losses as well. Father Adrian Adamik, new pastor of St. Cornelius, a parish of 661 families in the small town of Karnes City, said, "Parishioners have lost some crops, corn or hay."

In Floresville, southeast of San Antonio, where rivers were expected to crest soon, secretary Susan Nassar at Sacred Heart, a parish of 900 families, said, "We'll probably start to feel the impact in a few days."

San Antonio Archbishop Patrick F. Flores was to hold a press conference July 10 to announce plans to respond to the needs of those affected by the flooding.

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