

Friendship, faith shared at WYD

Imagine that you're sitting on a sleeping bag that you've spread out in the sun, surrounded by thousands of other sleeping bags, tents and people. To your left, a group of young people are talking excitedly in Spanish. Behind you, another group is singing a song in a language that sounds like German. You pick out a word or two from a conversation four French girls are engaged in as they walk by your sleeping bag. You see nuns and priests mixed in with the throng of teenagers and young adults passing by. Later in the evening, you'll see some of these nuns singing and waving glow sticks during the vigil with Pope John Paul II.

If you can picture this, then you're probably beginning to get an idea of what it was like to be at Downsview Park, Toronto, for World Youth Day 2002.

I made the pilgrimage to Toronto with nine other young adults and a group of teenagers and adult chaperones from St. John the Evangelist Parish in Spencerport, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish in Hamlin and Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Brockport.

When we arrived in Toronto, from the bus windows we could see large groups of people walking down the sidewalks, many of them carrying flags from different countries. This was when the excitement truly began for me, and I began to get a small idea of the scope of what I was about to participate in.

After leaving the bus, we hiked into Downsview Park, where we were herded into lines to pass through the metal detectors and to have our bags checked. Downsview Park had been divided into several sections, and we were assigned to the purple section. As we walked through the field to our section, I was reminded of pictures I've seen of Woodstock. There were huge metal sections of scaffolding set up, and many of them held "jumbotrons" and

giant speakers blaring worship music in several languages. There were people everywhere. They laughed, danced and sang in the sun. It truly was a celebration — people celebrated their faith and their fellowship with other Catholics from places they had only seen in pictures.

Once we came to the purple area, we needed to claim a small section of the field for our group. This turned out to be harder than expected, since every time we found an area that looked open, we were told it was being saved for someone else. We ended up cooperating with a group from Canada to secure an area big enough for both of us, if we squished.

Pilgrims from Trinidad and Tobago soon moved in next to us, and a German group had claimed the space behind us even before we got there. Once I had become acquainted with our new neighbors, I laid back on the sleeping bag and listened to the blend of languages around me. I felt the joy that was practically buzzing in the air and could not believe I was finally there.

I marveled that each person around me was there for the same reason and had the same basic set of beliefs as I. Even though you may have no idea what the persons next to you are saying, you know exactly what is in their hearts. I looked around and saw, in just one glance, the flags from at least 10 different countries. Though they were very different, each fluttered proudly as they all flew united through Christ. It was very moving, especially in this time of so much war and terrorism, and a sense of peace and hopefulness settled over me.

This feeling remained with me even after I had ventured to the portable toilets and back. They were located at one end of the field, and a typical trip to the bathroom could take a half hour.

Getting to and from both the restrooms and the food areas became a problem around 6 p.m., when a section of road dividing the field in half was closed to allow the pope to travel it when he arrived for the vigil that night. Several members of our group had left to get food for us and were stranded on the other side. One of them managed to get back with food before the road was closed. He suggested we go up to the barricades and try to get a good spot to see the pope.

A crowd was already gathering around the barricades when we got there, but it was only four people deep. I couldn't see the pope when he passed by, but knowing that he was within 10 feet of me gave me goose bumps.

While we were waiting for the pope, a group of French girls came up behind us, and two of them held one of their smaller friends in the air. They seemed to be struggling, so the girl in the air



Thousands of World Youth Day pilgrims line up along the barricades to watch the pope pass in the popemobile, while others watch his arrival on the jumbotron screens before the July 27 evening vigil in Toronto's Downsview Park.

asked two in our group to help hold her. She promised to take a picture of the pope for us with our cameras. After the pope had passed, we stayed and talked. I do not know French, but her English was so good that we were able to communicate. Before we parted, we gave each other an item from our home countries. She gave me a beautiful religious medal, and I gave her a red, white and blue rosary that a member of

made me feel a surge of energy and a desire to prove him right.

Even after the vigil, at 11 at night, excitement still filled the air. Walking across Downsview Park, I heard groups celebrating, each in their own way. Some sang, some beat on drums and some shook tambourines.

By 12:30 a.m., things were dying down. I was just beginning to doze off when music blasted from the speakers on stage. Someone apparently had thought it would be a fine time to start a concert in support of vocations. I fell asleep anyway, but apparently the music lasted until about 2:30. It sprinkled during the night, but that didn't seem to bother many people. The real rain came at about 5:30 a.m., when people were just beginning to wake up. It lasted for

less than an hour, but started again about an hour before the pope arrived for Mass at 9 a.m.

I stood next to my father in the pouring rain and watched the pope celebrate the closing Mass. I was lucky enough to have him and my two brothers accompany me on this pilgrimage. Even though we were not always in the same place in the park, I knew that we were having similar experiences and memories, and I feel blessed to be able to share that with them.

The most moving part of the Mass for me was the celebration of the Eucharist. To know that I was partaking in the body of Christ along with 800,000 other people took my breath away.

The five-mile hike back to the bus in the sweltering heat took away some of the reverent mood that we'd had during the Mass, but after some rest and food, my group and I were able to look back on our weekend with some of that same reverence and awe. Even though we may not appear to have been through a life-changing event, we are all different in some ways from what we were when we were on that bus the first time.

I took so many things away from this experience. I have made new friends, gained new-found respect for other cultures, seen the pope and celebrated a Mass with him and hundreds of thousands of other Catholics. There are so many other things I that I can't even put into words. It gives me hope, though, because the pope had enough faith in us to come and see us, and we had enough faith in him and our church to come and see him.

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my family had made for me to trade. I gave her my e-mail address, and I hope we have a long friendship. It was incredible to meet someone from so far away and actually be able to develop a personal relationship, and to know that we were brought together by our faith.

The vigil was another amazing experience. I felt so lucky to actually be able to see the pope, and hear him speak to me and the other people of my generation. I began to realize how much it meant that he actually came here to be with us. My grandfather has Parkinson's disease, and I have seen the way it affects him. I watched the pope wave to people, hand high in the air as he rode in, and I watched him sit on stage until 10 at night to be with us and talk to us. I realized how much of an effort it must have taken him to do this.

The pope began World Youth Day many years ago because he has faith in the young adults of the world, and his dedication to us has not wavered. He has faith that we can lead the church into the next century. The tremendous amount of support that I felt from this man, at a time when young people are often viewed as irresponsible and materialistic,



Pilgrims from St. John the Evangelist Parish, Spencerport; St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish, Hamlin; and Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish, Brockport, line up for a picture before leaving for Toronto July 27.

on the NOW

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