

## Stations draw host of nations

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

Sandro Sanon, 18, the son of Haitian immigrants who live in Brentwood, Long Island, looked tired the night of July 26, but said he was just beginning to have fun at World Youth Day in Toronto.

"We're just one big happy family," he said, as he rested on a park bench with a group of first-generation Haitian-American Catholics. A dozen such teenagers and adults had traveled with him from St. Anne's Parish in Brentwood, most of them sponsored through the fundraising efforts of their pastor, Father Marc-Arthur Jerome.

Sandro said it was refreshing to be treated by older people as if he and his friends were responsible citizens, not potential troublemakers.

"We can come together and walk in the streets without the police coming up and asking us if we're in a gang or doing drugs."

Sandro was one of tens of thousands of teenage and young-adult Catholics gathered that evening for the Way of the Cross, a dramatic staging of the 14 Stations of the Cross in downtown Toronto. The Way of the Cross commemorates the events of the passion of Jesus, including his trial and crucifixion.

A police officer agreed with Sandro's statement that adults were looking at the WYD crowd with approval rather than suspicion.

"There have been no disturbances," the officer said. "The spirit of the gathering really dictates the spirit of the crowd."

Sandro's friend, Nancy Cadet, 18, a native of Haiti, said she shared his sentiments about events like the Way of the Cross at World Youth Day.

"We're meeting people from all around the world who are here for something positive instead of negative," Nancy said. "This is a chance for us to get together and show we can do something positive and with a purpose."

Robert Légère, 25, of St. Louis de Kent near Moncton, New Brunswick, played Jesus in the Way of the Cross. A computer programmer with no theatrical training, he said he probably would not have attended World Youth Day had he not been selected to portray Jesus.

"It's incredible to be asked to do this," he said.

Father Robert Gendreau produced the play, which was written by Pope John Paul II. Father Gendreau said the performance "is quite original to Toronto. It is novel in that they are blocking main streets for 12 stations."

"The biggest challenge was finding an actor for Jesus Christ," the priest added. "We had 60 applicants: 50 girls, 10 men. All of the men had short hair, which was a big problem."

He said he put the matter of finding an actor in the hands of the Lord. Finally, while walking down the street, he found Légère, who was attending a charity function with his work colleagues. In addition to his long hair, he had what Father Gendreau described as "the right face."

During the performance, actors moved in procession from stage to stage with 200 young people from all nations. Father Gendreau noted that younger people are not used to or even aware of the traditional way of doing the Way of the Cross. This dramatic performance was a way of introducing them to the devotion. There were some Latin prayers woven into the performance, as well as the singing of "Ave Maria." Torches carried by participants



Karin von Volgtlander/Staff photographer

Shylah Bergie of Mississauga, Ontario, watches the Way of the Cross in the rain Friday, July 26.



Karin von Volgtlander/Staff photographer

Robert Légère, portraying Jesus, carries the cross.

were lit from an "eternal" flame originally lighted by the pope in 1984. The text was read aloud in English and French.

The Way of the Cross began in Nathan Philip's Square, in front of Toronto City Hall, and moved along University Avenue. It passed through Queen's Park, and concluded outside the Royal Ontario Museum. Particularly moving to many participants was a performance by Janis Clark and the WYD choir of "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord" during the 14th station. Hundreds could be heard singing the old spiritual along with the choir.

Despite the solemn nature of the Way of the Cross, the crowd was anything but solemn most of the time. Small crowds of young people took the opportunity to hold hands in circles and dance in the streets, playing tambourines and hand drums. Dozens waved flags from such countries as Poland, Italy, China and Australia.

The young people talked and prayed, or watched and listened to the scenes of the passion of Jesus. When a stage was empty, the crowd could still see the scene being enacted elsewhere on large video screens on the sides of empty stages.

Father Bonn Labrador, a 35-year-old Filipino priest, watched from his seat beneath a tree. He noted that the huge crowds of young people encouraged him because he had come to Toronto thinking the faith was decreasing in popularity among the young.

"I've realized that the Catholic Church, especially among the youth, is very much alive globally," he said.

He added that he had come to Toronto

to see a pope who visited his country in 1984 and 1995, and who drew millions to an outdoor Mass in Manila in 1995.

"The pope loves the Philippines," he said. "It's not a rich country, but we're rich in faith."

Nearby, outside an insurance company building where she worked, Trinidad native and Canadian citizen Theresa Gomez said her parish had asked its members to host some teenagers from Germany. She had decided not to house any, thinking she would not be able to control their behavior, but she said that she regretted her decision.

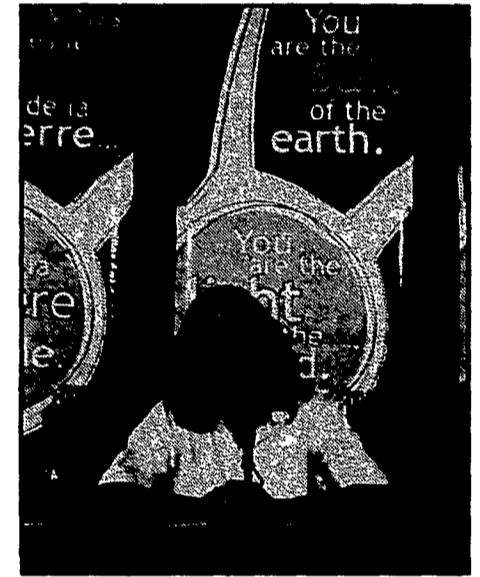
"We've never seen such a well-behaved group of kids," Gomez said. "They just seem to be very happy, singing among themselves and helping each other."

Another adult who enjoyed the crowds of young people was Carol Parks, who drove seven teenagers, including her daughters Maeghan and Kelli, in a minivan from Gary, Ind., to Toronto.

"Youth grow by support," she said. "When they see this many young people that are interested in Christ, that's enough to make them interested."

John Patrick Janowski, 20, a senior at Cornell University in the Diocese of Rochester, said he came to World Youth Day so he could see the pope and feel part of the worldwide Catholic community.

Janowski said he was discerning a vocation to the priesthood, and considered it one of the best ways for a young man to serve the church. In a "pan-sexual," materialistic, individualistic society, considering the priesthood as a way of life is



Catholic Courier

Légère listens to questions during a July 25 media briefing at Toronto's Exhibition Place.

"counter-cultural," he said, but nonetheless a calling he's seriously contemplating. He added that coming to World Youth Day had helped to bolster his faith.

"I think meeting other Catholics from around the world is very inspiring," he said. "To know that there are other people who are active in their faith and who love their faith."

Miriam Figueroa, an 18-year-old Mexican Catholic who came to World Youth Day with her sister, Gabby, 15, said she had wanted to be there to see the pope and had attended the WYD papal welcoming ceremony at Exhibition Place on July 25.

"I felt incredible because you felt his peace in the way he talks," she said. She was particularly inspired by the pope's encouragement of young people to not be afraid, she said. She added that for her, faith makes her happy. "Without it, nothing matters," she said.

A common concern among the young people was the peer pressure they face to not practice their faith, and the level of practice in their respective countries. Christopher McGrory, a 17-year-old from Donegal, Ireland, said some of his peers considered Catholicism a "waste of time." However, he made it clear that was not a view he shared.

"You need something in life to follow, or you just go down the wrong road," he said. He added that he made sure that he spent some time on a regular basis thinking about his beliefs.

"You can sit down a half-hour with God. That can't be a waste of time."

Contains reporting by Karen Franz.