

# UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY



*World Youth Day 2013 has been and gone but the experience and opportunity will resound for a long time. When two pilgrims from the Diocese returned home, they put together a written record of their experiences. Here are those reflections:*

## Reflections from a WYD veteran:

To take a step away from your 'normal' life and to head on pilgrimage is a unique opportunity. However, when that pilgrimage is with an amazing group of young Victorians, to South America, culminating with Mass on Copacabana beach with the new South American Pope, this opportunity quickly becomes a once in a life time experience.

This pilgrimage had two unique components. The first was a mission experience on route to Rio. For me it was Mission Chile. Our group of fifty Victorians was partnered with the San Matias parish in Puente Alto, Santiago. For a week we prayed, danced, shared our lives and shared our faith with the inspiring people of this parish. Then it was on to Rio, with 3.7 million people and one inspiring Papa Francisco.

During this pilgrimage we laughed, cried, celebrated, questioned, listened and reflected. We rapped the rosary, slept in a room with over 300 other Aussies, queued for two hours for some very suspect porta loos, got caught in crowds, joined the chant of 'Papa Francisco' and in true pilgrimage style we were challenged.

Ultimately, for this pilgrim, at the foot of Christ the Redeemer, amongst all the excitement and big events there was an encounter with God. Pope Francis, at his welcome to Rio, said that 'During the Year of Faith, this World Youth Day is truly a gift offered to us to draw us closer to the Lord, to be his disciples and his missionaries, to let him renew our lives'.

I experienced God in the remarkable people of the San Matias parish. They welcomed us with an uninhibited spirit that made us feel like we were royalty. We had heard stories of the problems that permeate this community, but there was no sign of these issues as we were embraced into their lives. We shared prayer, meals, experiences of mission and laughs with this beautiful parish who had worked for over twelve months to prepare for our arrival. Whilst I do not speak Spanish and they have limited English, we found many languages in



common, including music, dance, sport and smiles. However, ultimately it was our faith that brought us together and where I had the most powerful moments. I will never forget our final mass with the Chileans where we joined hands and fervently prayed the Our Father in Spanish and English simultaneously. It was an emotional goodbye when we left Santiago but an experience that has challenged me to think about the value of community, the power of welcome and what we can learn from others.

I experienced God in the remarkable young pilgrims that I had the privilege to share this journey with. It amazes me how I found myself talking to and walking beside the right person at the right time during this pilgrimage. As pilgrims, we shared a unique friendship. We supported each other through various challenges, learnt together and celebrated together. Our pilgrimage group became the best example of what it means to live as Church and I have

no doubt that, just like my previous WYD experiences, that these bonds will continue to be an integral part of my life.



I experienced God through Pope Francis aka Papa Francisco. Pope Francis embodied a warmth that I couldn't help but be captivated by. He spoke to the crowd of millions like he was speaking to me one on one at the local pub. Pope Francis told us to 'Go, Be Not Afraid and Serve'. It's really that simple. Pope Francis challenged us to bring Jesus to the world so that we can 'break down evil and violence, to destroy and overthrow the barriers of selfishness, intolerance and hatred, so as to build a new world.' He inspired me when he said that 'Jesus Christ is counting on you! The Church is counting on you! The Pope is counting on you!'

So like all good pilgrimages the real challenge is only just beginning as each pilgrim continues to reflect on their experience. I have definitely experienced an injection of faith, a renewed passion for the young heart of the Church and an increased desire to walk in solidarity with the poor. Thus far, this pilgrimage has reminded me that during the tough times I should not be afraid, because God has got my back. As Cardinal Timothy Dolan from New York said to us, we need to be patient because we can live our lives like microwaves but God is a crockpot. I look forward to discovering, in whatever amount of time it takes, how the WYD theme to 'Go make disciples of all nations' will reach fulfilment in my life.

A sincere and heartfelt thank you to all those people who have supported the pilgrims through their prayers and financial support. I am particularly grateful to the community of St Colman's, Mortlake for their support of me as well as the Catholic Education Office Ballarat.

*Stacey Atkins*

### Reflecting on World Youth Day:

After an overnight flight from Santiago, the Victorian pilgrims who were a part of Mission Chile arrived in Rio de Janeiro. The warm weather that greeted us was a change from the cold weather we experienced in Chile. After a bus ride from the airport and a bit of Christ the Redeemer spotting (it was too smoggy to see him) we arrived at Aussie Central where we would be staying for the week. After a briefing on life at Aussie Central we had the day to ourselves to do as we pleased. My group did a bit of exploring around the area of Rio closest to Aussie Central before catching up on some sleep in the afternoon. That night we gathered as a Victorian group for Mass at St Rita's church and then had dinner together.



The next day a group of us made our way up to Christ the Redeemer. The weather was wet and cloudy but still warm enough to wear shorts. As we made our way up to the statue we rose above the clouds and Rio disappeared below. The photos we took were quite different to those you see on postcards as Christ was surrounded by clouds and misty rain. Despite the weather it was a great site to see and definitely something that I will remember for a long time. After our trip up the mountain we made our way to Copacabana beach to attend the opening mass that was said by the Archbishop of Rio. This was our first encounter with big crowds and little did we know this was a small crowd compared to what was to come.

We became quite good at navigating our way around Rio via the metro as we made our way to Catechesis at Viva Rio on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday of the World Youth Day week. We listened to some great speakers especially Cardinal Timothy Dolan and a great experience of this time was our Australian gathering. There was great music, videos and photos from the various mission experiences and a rather invigorating talk from Bishop Chris Prowse. The atmosphere of this gathering of young Australian Catholics makes me wonder what the Australian Youth Festival in Melbourne will be like. There was certainly a lot of talk about this at the gathering.

As the week went on we were given opportunities to see the Pope. This started on Thursday when some people braved the rain and the wind to venture to Copacabana beach to welcome the Pope. Others chose to watch this event on TV screens either at Viva Rio or at restaurants around Rio. Portuguese may not have been spoken by some pilgrims but the words Papa Francisco was enough to get the message across to have the TV channel changed. Many also saw the Pope at Stations on the Cross on the Friday. As each day went on and each event occurred the crowds grew larger.

After quite a bit of rain early on in the week, the site for the final Vigil and Mass was changed to Copacabana beach at the last moment. This meant that instead of being bused some of the way for our pilgrim walk we started our walk from Aussie Central. We left Aussie Central around 9am as a Victorian group and made our way to Copacabana. After a stop to collect our pilgrim food packs we arrived at the beach around noon. We staked our claim on a section of beach and settled in for the night. Everyone was in high spirits as we waited for the Pope to come. You could hear the cheers before you could see him. After the vigil it was time to try and get a bit of sleep. As the sun rose the weather warmed up and a beautiful day welcomed us. Perfect weather for sitting on the beach for mass. It was also in the light of day that we realised just how big the crowd was. The aerial shots of three million people were amazing. What was even more amazing was the silence of three million people when parts of the Mass required this. As the Mass drew to a close people eagerly began waiting for the announcement of where the next world youth day will be. As Pope Francis announced Krakow, Poland the Polish pilgrims near us jumped up and cheered very loudly. At the end of Mass the fun task of making our way out of the crowd and back to Aussie Central was ahead of us. We may have been tired but the experience of the Mass made the journey a bit easier.



World Youth Day was amazing and I have been told by others who have been on past World Youth Days that it is difficult to put into words just what the experience was like. I have to agree with them now. The only people who truly understand what the experience was like are those who were on the journey with you. It is something that I will remember always and look back on with fondness.

Jessie Slatter