

World Youth Day – Madrid 2011

After over a year of preparation sessions, World Youth Day 2011, clichés aside, couldn't have approached any faster. The personal reason I wanted to go on the pilgrimage was to find like-minded Catholics of my age which, in this day and age is so hard to do, especially in the environment of university. I hoped that by doing so, my faith would be strengthened and friendships established where similar problems can be openly shared, improving my relationship with God. During the preparation sessions, we performed various ice breakers and got a taster of what the pilgrimage will hold, in an attempt to familiarise ourselves with the people we would be spending 10 long, jam-packed days with.

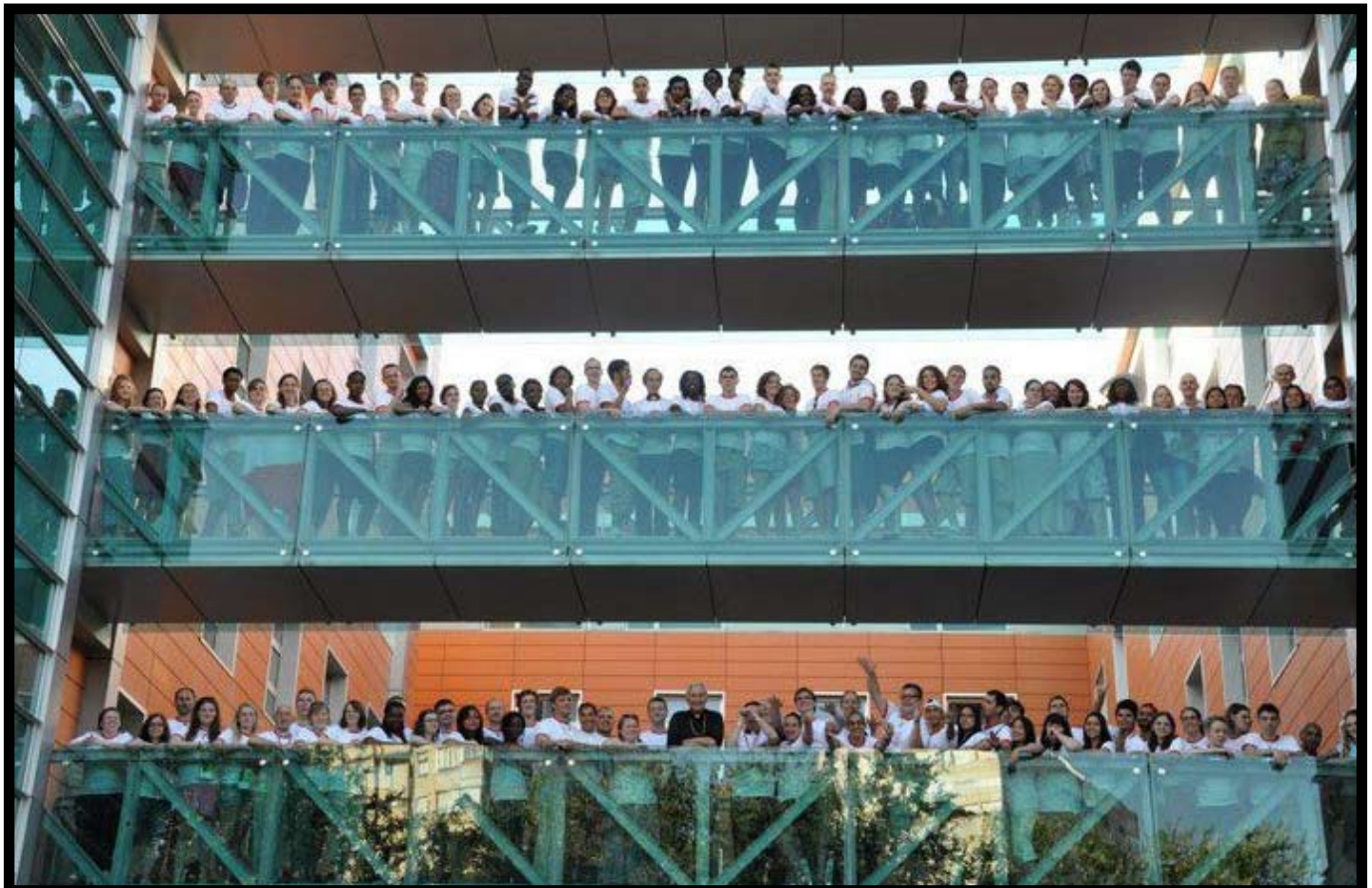
After three different early morning flights and connecting coaches from both Bilbao and Porto, the 100+ group representing Westminster gathered in Salamanca where we acclimatised ourselves to the Spanish lifestyle and got our first taste of things to come. It was a peaceful time of getting to know our fellow pilgrims, including the priests and seminarians who joined us on our pilgrimage. Salamanca was beautiful, and the local people were very welcoming to us, often stopping us in the street to give us hugs and tell us to enjoy our "holiday". This was something which touched me. One will find it hard to imagine the same thing happening in London where the general public are more likely to focus their attention on the road while walking briskly to work, rather than paying any attention to a sudden influx of young people to their city. It was also exciting to see the first groups from other countries. The Plaza Mayor (main

square) was often the site for midnight dancing and singing with our fellow Catholics from Italy, Zambia, Australia and many other countries.

After three lovely days in Salamanca, we journeyed to Madrid, stopping in Avila on the way, where we saw the place where St Teresa lived and built up the Carmelite order. It was not only a beautiful location, but also felt holy to all of us. Hearing about St Teresa's young life and how she had grown up was especially fitting.

During the three days in Salamanca, strong friendships had been established and learning that we would be sharing rooms in our accommodation in Madrid caused a lot of talk amongst all the pilgrims. This added even more suspense to the already worrying anticipation of the type of accommodation we would have to endure over the next week. On arrival, it was clear to see that we were very, very lucky. It was a very modern student residence with hot showers, a games room, equipped with a pool and football tables and a pristinely kept lounge; stark contrast to other pilgrims, forced to sleep on the floor of sports halls or camp outside in the bushes that we could see in the distance from our hotel balcony.

In Madrid, we had the Westminster Mass which Archbishop Vincent attended and I had the privilege of reading at, along with masses every day and Morning and Evening Prayer built into our daily schedule. These events gave us the opportunity for group prayer, allowing us to give up any intentions, in which I prayed for the parish. However, the first real



A group photo of the Westminster Pilgrims

event of World Youth Day was the arrival of the Holy Father to Madrid. I was already shocked by the number of pilgrims partaking in the same journey as me from all countries and from all works of life. This shock was to turn into absolute amazement as we got out of the tube station in the centre of Madrid to see the endless sea of people stretching for miles down the road. It was breathtaking to not only see the sheer number packed into one city centre, but to then think that all these people were Catholics, with similar thoughts, beliefs and intentions. This made the 40 degree heat which the Spanish climate brought all the more unbearable. However, the locals were very mindful of this spraying us all with water.

It was hard to imagine that the number of people present when the Pope arrived would increase significantly for the overnight vigil, the culmination of World Youth Day at Cuatro Vientos airfield. It is traditional to walk to the event; so in the 40 degree heat and with backpacks and sleeping bags, all the Westminster pilgrims set foot to the site. The three hour walk was accompanied with, again, ordinary Spanish people sympathising and appreciating our efforts, pouring water out of their windows down onto us and filling up our water bottles. By the time we got there, our assigned place as registered pilgrims had been taken up by the floods of people that had arrived earlier in the day, so we were resigned to being right at the back in the overflow area. It was estimated that two and half million people were packed into this airfield ready for a night of vigil followed by mass in the morning. The anticipation for this event throughout the previous eight days was immense but it seemed to be marred by the freakish appearance of a thunderstorm. Hail stones, torrential rain and lightning arrived as if there was no tomorrow. The heavens literally opened on millions of people whose only protection was measly sleeping bags. To add to this, we were unable to receive our pilgrim picnics until 3am. Hungry and wet, I sat and contemplated how miserable I was. However, I decided to think “outside the box” and ponder what God was trying to tell me. I began to realise that, although we had previously received free food, five star treatment from ordinary people on the street and amazing weather, this was a pilgrimage and not a holiday.

Thoughts on World Youth Day

What springs to mind?
 Learning how to communicate through signs
 Everyone acting kind
 Its catholic camp so throw up your CC signs
 Overnight vigil in a desert,
 that looks like it could be infested with mines
 Eating at midnight
 Plaza Mayor rarely failed to excite
 Carnival atmosphere, constant sound of the beating drum
 Hear the beetles with their scuttling runs
 State of the loos meant avoid taking dumps
 “Blessed be your name” being sung
 While you tried hard not to close eyes at the front
 38 degree heat is the norm
 so all I can say is thank God for aircon
 Nigeria, Ecuador, Italy and Hong Kong
 Every nation in one place as one
 To give praise to God and his son
 Receive the Holy Spirit as breath to the lungs
 Get out of the jungle London’s become
 I feel free, enlightened, weak at the knees
 Strive to be the best I can be
 In an environment surrounded by snakes and bees
 So I’ll take back what I’ve seen
 Hopefully help out the community
 Read the bible to fulfil dreams
 Use its words to make my life gleam
 Like “I came that you may have life and life to the full”
 You can check - that’s john 10 10
 Now look up to the sky and say an amen

People in the world have to live on fields similar to where we were; dry, infested with annoying insects, with no food and no shelter. It was the definition of an epiphany if there was one and I used it to soldier through the night.

In the morning, the Pope celebrated Mass which unfortunately lacked the presence of communion to all due to the weather of the night before. Many people saw the vigil as an anti-climax, but the events which took place during the course of the night were a real eye opener for me. After the mass was over, we began the long trek home which involved the splitting of the group as some opted to walk back and others needed public transport. The shower which I had on arrival back to the hotel was the best of my life.

Throughout the trip I was pleasantly surprised by the normality of all the people who were on the pilgrimage which is something that the everyday person in this country fails to understand about Catholics. This was demonstrated in the talent show we held on the last day. The worries I had during the preparation sessions of this trip consisting solely of endless prayer and quiet reflection with no fun added to it, seemed ridiculous. My aim could not have been fulfilled any better; I have established strong friendships with people who I get along with on a day to day basis both inside and outside a religious environment. The things I have learnt about my religion and about myself are endless and on hearing that the next World Youth Day will be in Rio de Janeiro in 2013, my eyes lit up. Every pilgrim has expressed serious interest, one pilgrim even saying he will pay for the trip right now. I would seriously encourage any young person in the parish to be as enthusiastic as I am about the next World Youth Day as it is a life changing opportunity which you will not regret.

I would like to thank the parishioners for their prayers and financial support, for without them I wouldn’t have been able to go on this pilgrimage and have this experience which I am sure will shape the rest of my life. *Ndubuisi Uchea*