

## World Youth Day Pilgrimage

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By

Deacon Tom Cioffi

After a years' effort in fundraising in our community and with the support from the Knights of Columbus Council #6793, the youth ministry at Saint Peter's Church in Olney, Maryland was able to send 28 teens, young adults, and senior chaperones to meet our Holy Father Benedict XVI as he journeyed to Madrid, Spain for World Youth Day.

Headed by Angela Busby, Saint Peter's Director of Youth Ministry, we arrived in Madrid, Spain on Monday August 15<sup>th</sup>. Immediately we began our journey of faith with a number of planned tours and activities. At the end of the week we would camp out at the vigil when the Holy Father would meet with over a million and one half pilgrims from all over the world to encourage us in our faith. At the conclusion of World Youth Day we will gather with the Holy Father as he celebrates Holy Mass.

And so we began on the first day of our journey and travelled to Avila, the birthplace of Saint Teresa. Here we were given a guided tour of the town. This is a town that is surrounded in a castle wall motif and is generally quiet and serene. The town came alive with pilgrims from other counties serving as ambassadors from their native land as they chanted warm greetings to other visiting groups. There was a posture of excitement between all of the groups walking along the streets. They were singing, and proudly displaying their country flags. To "break the ice" as they say, members of every country that we met wanted to trade pins and souvenirs with our group. The most popular trade, were pins of the American flag. We had a good supply of the pins for trading. All of this interaction was spirited and most welcoming. Of note was a comment made to our tour guide from one of the local residents who said, "Your presence here has made our quiet little town a place of joy and happiness and we all like you being here." After viewing the relics of Saint Theresa and learning the events that were important in her life, we also learned about Saint John of the Cross. While we were still in Avila, Father Riffle gathered us together to celebrate Holy Mass at the chapel of Our Lady of the Sons at the Convento di Santa Teresa. The chapel is so named because the eyes of the statue of Our Lady are noticeably wide open and penetrating as the sun. It is a beautiful Church and chapel. I was privileged to assist as deacon of the Mass. It was here that I began offering the intentions of our benefactors as I prayed for all of you. All of your written intentions given to me were offered up in prayer at each site and church I visited.



On Tuesday we went on a walking tour of the Plaza di Major. It was extremely hot with temperatures averaging 95 degrees. Keeping the kids hydrated was key and at times there did not seem to be enough water to drink. You could sense the momentum building as more and more groups of young people were being met and yes more chants and songs about faith and the love of Jesus Christ.

There were guitars being strummed, drums being drummed in cadence, there were even bagpipes being played by a group of teens from Scotland. Culturally this was a “melting pot” of people and a true demonstration of our universal church alive in the world. The Light of Christ is most evident in our youth and as I see it, the future of the Church is alive and well.

The morning of day three took us to a rally in a large arena, sponsored by the Sisters of Life. The keynote speaker was a nun who gave a beautiful witness and catechesis on the sanctity of life. After her presentation, confessions were made available and as I took advantage of receiving this healing sacrament, I saw several familiar priests from our archdiocese, including Father Greg Shaffer, hearing confessions. This sacrament was well celebrated and it was heartwarming to see so many people going to confession. Mass was then celebrated by the Archbishop of Sydney, Australia, George Cardinal Pell. One of the concelebrants of the Mass was our own Bishop Martin Holley who acknowledged our presence as he processed by our group.

We left the arena and attended a concert on pro-life sponsored by the Jesuits at their facility, Jesuit House. There was lots of singing and the musicians were engaging and prompting all to sing along and participate. More trading of souvenir items continued here and throughout the rest of the day as it became commonplace wherever we visited.



As we began to leave this concert, Father Riffle was called away from our group and went back to our hotel to assess a demonstration that was forming one block from our hotel. We knew before arriving in Madrid that some demonstrations were going to take place in protest of the Holy Father’s visit. Much of the dissent was that the visit was being paid for by the government. Additionally other anti-church and anti-pope groups jumped on the bandwagon to air their complaints, ranging from the ban on contraception to same sex marriage. When

we headed back towards the hotel we chose to take the subway because there was a station close to our hotel. We rode a few stops and were ordered off of the subway cars by the police because the demonstrations were escalating and it was unsafe to go farther. We were several blocks from the hotel and ended up at the la puerta de la Sol. This is a large circular plaza area with streets intersecting from every direction. We decided to eat at one of the restaurants. The dining area was on the second floor and overlooked the plaza. While we waited for our food to come, the protestors had moved away from our hotel and began to congregate in plain view of where we were eating. The demonstration escalated quickly with protest signs and reporters taking pictures. I estimated that there were about 300 protesters. It was getting out of hand and the police quickly moved in wearing riot gear, batons and large shields to push the protestors back and away. The police made several arrests. Businesses began to lock their doors keeping patrons inside for safekeeping and barring outsiders from entering. The manager of the restaurant told us we would have to stay inside until it was safe to leave. We watched

the event unravel and disperse. No one in our group was injured. When it was all over the police directed us away from the area opposite the direction of our hotel so we made a long wide loop to return safely to the hotel. The teens were afraid but confident that we would get them back safely to the hotel. At the hotel Angela Busby conducted a de-briefing of sorts for the teens to talk about their feelings and to make available to them the chaperones if they wished to talk more about the situation and ordeal privately. This was a good move on her part and the teens spoke freely with no perceived difficulties from the incident. They recognized that incidents such as these are prevalent in today's world. The hope of the youth is not to be afraid but to bear witness to Christ by living in His imitation. It is so important to become a light of hope in a world so often darkened when the Church and teachings are attacked.

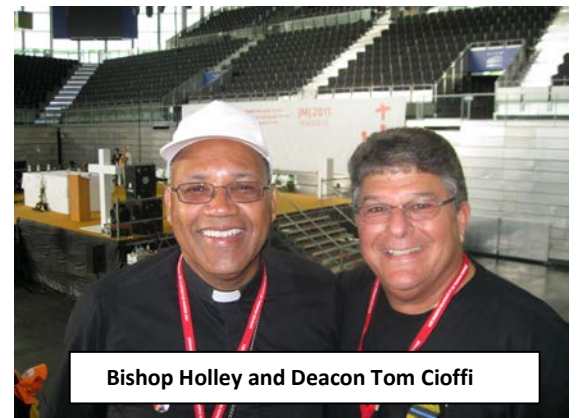
On Thursday August 18<sup>th</sup> we had a full day of sightseeing as we traveled to Toledo. The countryside is so beautiful and mountainous. At every church we visited here, we offered prayers and were able to light candles for special offerings. Needless to say all of my benefactors, and brother knights and gentle ladies were in my prayers.

After a full day in Toledo, we returned to the hotel to freshen up for the evening activities. I ended up taking a group of teens and young adults to the Prada Museum. Everyone seemed to enjoy this and afterwards we walked back to the hotel while interacting with the pilgrims who were out and about. It was pleasant walking about in the evening hours among the thousands of kids from everywhere imaginable who were just celebrating being together in Madrid.

On Friday August 19<sup>th</sup> we were up early and off to the Madrid Arena for a schedule program of singing entertainment before Mass would be celebrated. As we lined up to go inside the arena we met Bishop Holley, again who came over to greet us and take a few photos with the group. He is always a welcome sight to see and always takes the time to be with people.

While inside this arena we again had the opportunity to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Father Riffle, along with several priests and bishops were hearing confessions.

During the time confessions were being heard we listened to one of the entertainers singing. She was Danielle Rose, and is well known for her Christian music and for the many CD's she has recorded. She along with two other entertainers, John Angotti and Steven Angrisano put together a wonderful show and testament to their faith and the sanctity of life. John Angotti gave an emotional account of his life. He was adopted as an infant and late in his adult life, he found his birth mother. He dedicated a song to his mother thanking her for choosing to give him his life instead of abortion. You could have heard a pin drop as everyone was moved by his story.



**Bishop Holley and Deacon Tom Cioffi**

Prior to Mass the groups in attendance began chanting cheers and songs and challenged other groups to do the same. It was all very spirited and fun. I thought it was interesting that when our group stood up and sang Our National Anthem, other groups from other countries stood and placed their hands over their hearts while we sang. It was so respectful and at the conclusion all cheered us by chanting "USA, USA, USA, etc. It was remarkable.

Mass was celebrated by several priests and bishops. The main celebrant was Bishop Edward J. Burns from Juneau, Alaska. He gave an incredible homily in what it means to be a witness to Christ in today's world. Everyone was glued to his words and catechesis on being a witness in all walks of life. It does not matter whether one is single, married, or a member of the priesthood, or religious life, we are all called individually to be a messenger of the gospel and follower of Jesus Christ.

When Mass was over we exited the arena and lined up for a box lunch which was provided for everyone. After lunch, we headed for the metro rail and proceeded to the main square to await the Holy Father's arrival. Here we were going to pray the Stations of the Cross. The extreme heat and extremely large crowds did not discourage anyone from attending this event. By this time of the week the number of pilgrims who have arrived were over one and one half million and I was certain they were all here in this square as there was hardly a place to stand in the street. Several volunteers were equipped with water spraying devices and were dousing the crowds in an effort to cool everyone down.

It was a long day and because of the crowds, it took a while to get back to the hotel. Once there, many of the teens crashed, while others opted for fast food at a nearby McDonalds and Burger King.

On Saturday August 20<sup>th</sup> we began to make our way to the Vigil overnight camp. This has to be the hottest of days. After taking several buses we make our way to an airstrip which was designated as the campsite to accommodate all of the pilgrims. The airstrip is about 350 acres of runways, taxiways with grassy areas between the roadways. The asphalt is so hot underfoot and adjacent accesses are covered in paving rocks making it difficult to walk. The crowds of people were stumbling along as groups were looking for their assigned designated sites which were marked with flags, A-1, A-2, A-3 etc. Our site was D-1 and was about the size of an acre square. It is so hot that people are collapsing and ambulance personal are kept very busy. Several fire trucks that pump water are driving up and down the airstrip runways and with hoses were spraying everyone with water to cool us all down. When we arrived at our designated site we found that it was completely full with pilgrims. There was not enough room for our group. Two of the young adult chaperones, Francisco Melendez and Sean Sullivan set out to scout another site. At about 5:00PM, Francisco and Sean returned to lead us to an area that is at the end of one of the several runways. We broke out into two groups and tried getting through the crowds. Sean was leading my group and I followed from the rear to keep our group together. All were lugging knapsacks, food bags and folding canvas chairs that each were given. The crowds were overwhelming as we snaked our way through. When we came to a crossway strip I was swallowed up in the crowd and was not able to see the rest of our group. I realized I was losing sight of them and then they all disappeared in the mass of people. At this point I did not know which way they turned so I decide, of course, to turn the wrong way. It took forever to move in any direction. After walking around the

crowds for about two miles, I figured the rest of the group went the other way so I turned around. It was getting dark and I checked my watch to see it was 7:30 PM. I had been walking aimlessly around for a little over two hours. What made it worse was that everyone was wearing the same orange hats and carrying the same orange and yellow knapsacks so it was difficult to identify any one group over another. I took a moment to gather my thoughts and how I could find our group. There was a great deal of noise with music playing over loud speakers and individual groups singing and adding to all of the noise. I said to myself, "Deacon Cioffi you are a lost sheep. Along the way I stopped to try my Spanish on a volunteer and asked him to call Father Riffle's phone. This did not work either because the volunteer did not understand or could not operate his cell phone. At this point the biblical story about the "Tower of Babel" came to mind as no one understood me and I could not communicate with anyone else. I noted along the way several large canvas tents that were serving as Adoration Chapels and a place for confessions to be heard.

Now the Holy Father was at the camp site and could be seen by all from strategically placed big screen televisions. These are the kind one sees at sporting events. There was so much noise I could not hear what he was saying.

As I wandered around, it was starting to get dark, overcast, and was getting windy. A rainstorm was heading my way. I tried my luck with another volunteer to seek assistance and contact Father Riffle by phone. The volunteer had difficulty calling so she called the support center and I suggested that a text message be sent to Father Riffle. I said to text Father Riffle and tell him I am at the # 1 Chapel tent across from C-1 section. She nodded that she understood and then left as it was starting to rain. Well it certainly did rain. It came down very hard and was extremely windy. I was soaked. I later learned that the wind gusts toppled one of the Adoration tents on the other side of the area. The Holy Father was speaking to the crowds in a protected area but even his zucchetto flew off of his head.



As the rain subsided, I looked up and was relieved to see Father Riffle, Francisco and Sean approaching me with huge smiles of relief. I said to them, "What shepherd would leave the 99 sheep and look for the one lost sheep." We made our way back to the end of the runway camp site that was also very crowded and I was greeted by our pilgrims in the same way as the father greeted his son in the parable of the prodigal son. The rest of the night was spent in trying to catch some sleep but with all the activity it was near impossible.

Morning brought the sun and heat again as well as the humidity. Mass with the Holy Father was to begin at 9:30 AM so Father Riffle, Deacon Crawford and I vested and made our way to the other side of the area to participate in Mass. Everyone else stayed in their location and viewed the Mass from the big television screens.

The Holy Father called on the youth of today to be like a growing tree. All must be planted firmly the ground with roots of faith and be a witness of Jesus Christ in the world. Deeply rooted faith enables us to confront life in a challenging world and develop a relationship of trust and friendship with Jesus Christ. This further allows the young person to grow and think positively and to be broadminded towards others as to give of themselves to achieve goodness, justice and always seek the truth.

At the conclusion of Mass, we began our long journey back to the hotel. All of us were exhausted and eagerly awaited to get back to our rooms for a shower, clean clothes and some badly needed rest. Tonight we all enjoyed an authentic dinner of paella at the Los Galayos Restaurant. This is our last dinner in Madrid. Soon we would be packing up to leave Madrid.

Our extended pilgrimage took us to Burgos, where we were treated to a guided tour of the Cathedral De Burgos which was built in 1221. It is chiefly of gothic design with gargoyles to drain the roof water and high reaching spirals. It is similar to the great Cathedral of Notre Dame. Inside the Cathedral is breath taking and has many chapels dedicated to the Blessed Mother. Here we celebrated Mass. Father Riffle gave a beautiful homily on the feast day of Mary Our Queen. This beautiful Cathedral with all of the unique chapels allowed us to give thanks for the many blessings that have been bestowed on us and prompted us to pray for all who have made this trip possible.



Steps to Cathedral De Burgos

We left the Cathedral and walked back to the Hotel Abba Burgos and enjoyed a leisurely dinner in the dining room. This particular hotel had a swimming pool and the teens were quick to take note. And so they all enjoyed an evening in the swimming pool. Tonight we get a good night's rest and prepare to leave Spain and journey to Lourdes, France.

Up early all are excited as we travel 3&1/2 hours to Lourdes. Once again the countryside is beautiful with rolling landscape and quaint houses and farms along the way. The town of Lourdes is picturesque and rich in old architecture. It is almost as if one is living in the time of Saint Bernadette. The streets are very narrow and are lined with many shops and cafes. After we check into the hotel our group takes a stroll towards the Grotto to find townspeople and pilgrims praying the rosary. We take leave from here and locate the chapel of Saint Patrick to celebrate Mass. The chapel is very small but perfect for our group as we gather together in prayer. After Mass we went to the hotel to enjoy wonderful dinner of salmon and fresh vegetables and bruschetta.



As evening nears, we participate in a candlelight vigil and procession at the Grotto. It is a very moving and prayerful event. All of us held lit candles and sang hymns to Our Blessed Mother as we prayed the rosary. While this is happening, great numbers of volunteers are pushing wheelchairs and wagon type chariots in procession for those who cannot walk. With light coming only from our candles, the mood here is solemn and incredibly beautiful. It is as if the whole village of Lourdes is in attendance. This happens every evening and is a true witness of

faith in God and a respectful devotion to Our Lady.

It is August 24<sup>th</sup>, the last day in Lourdes before we leave to go home. After an early breakfast we walk to the Grotto and line up to be submerged in the healing springs that Saint Bernadette dug when instructed by Mary. It is raining lightly but this does not alter the mood. By far this was for me the most emotional experience that I can remember. The whole process was done with such prayerful respect and dignity and as I was wrapped in a full body sheet, I was assisted by English speaking volunteers who prayed with me, and allowed me to take the time for individual prayer before being lowered into the spring water. Moved by this experience, I thought of my family, all of my friends and those who asked me to pray for them. As I was being lowered into the water I felt tears of joy streaming down my face. This place takes hold of you in such a wonderful way that it is hard to describe. I have never felt so much at peace as in this moment. When I was lifted out of the water I was offered fresh spring water to drink. I thanked the volunteer attendants and blessed them and told them I was a deacon. One attendant blessed me back, smiled and said he was a priest. We both laughed and shook hands. For me this was the hallmark of our pilgrimage and a wonderful way to close this faith filled journey.

Back at the hotel, we loaded our luggage on the bus and began the long journey to return home. The long plane ride home gave me sufficient time to reflect on this wonderful pilgrimage and in how it has changed me. I cannot help but feel that through this pilgrimage I have been drawn closer to God and have seen the face of His Son Jesus Christ reflected in the witness of so many people. I am encouraged by their faith and was privileged to be counted as one among these pilgrims.

THANK YOU!!!