

Its Not Just Me Out There: Type A Pilgrims at World Youth Day*

Richard Rymarz

Abstract

Since its inception over twenty years ago World Youth Day (WYD) has become a significant social phenomenon. It is one of the largest, reoccurring international gatherings of young people in the world today. This paper investigates the attraction and impact of WYD for a particular sub group , called here type A pilgrims, characterized as a relatively select group who have traveled a considerable distance to attend. Forty one WYD participants were interviewed and it was argued that they experienced a strong sense of the *other* at WYD. This is where participants move from their conventional world to another place that is different not just in terms of landscape but also in terms of a new ordering of social and other relationships. Beliefs and practices that were marginal in their conventional world were made more plausible at WYD by social validation, strong affective association, more direct engagement of the metaphysical aspects of Catholicism and a new greater awareness of the cognitive basis of belief.

Introduction



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World Youth Day (WYD) is an international gathering of Catholics aged between 16 and 35, held every two or three years in a different host city.¹ First held in 1984 at the instigation of Pope John Paul II WYD has become a significant social phenomenon for a number of reasons but perhaps most obviously for the numbers who participate in it. In 2000 in Rome over two and a half million people took part. WYD 1995 in Manila recorded an estimated attendance of over eight million. Interest in WYD shows no signs of abating under the new pontiff, Benedict XVI, who attended WYD 2005 in Cologne and is due to attend WYD

2008 in Sydney². WYD can be seen through a variety of prisms. In promotional literature it is described as a pilgrimage and those who attend as pilgrims. In this study it will be seen as an example of a contemporary pilgrimage where one single explanation cannot be given to cover the interest and motivations of those who attend (Eade and Sallnow, 1991). A significant interest here will be on those who attend WYD with a religious predisposition and for whom being at WYD parallels the pilgrimage experience of movement from an established world to an *other*, transitory reality which does not overlap strongly with the conventional world (Turner and Turner, 1978). The movement to the other world is an intense experience, somewhat akin to an immersion experience where religious activities are at the forefront, often experienced in a way and intensity that is unfamiliar to those who are participating.

One way of approaching WYD on a conceptual level is to see it as somewhat of a paradox. There is strong evidence of a widespread dissatisfaction of young adults from mainstream Christian churches such as the Catholic Church (Davie 1994; Kay and

Francis, 1996; Bellamy et al, 2002; Dixon, 2004). Yet very large numbers of young people attend WYD. In the light of this there has been surprisingly little research on who goes to WYD. Hervieu-Leger (1994) observed French pilgrims who attended WYD in Czestochowa, Poland in 1991. She commented on how many of the pilgrims were associated with religious communities of some sort and this made them unusual amongst contemporary French young adults. She saw WYD as one way of keeping alive the religious memory in a community where it was greatly imperiled. Rymarz (2006, 2008) reporting on Australian WYD participants who travelled to Cologne in 2005 noted that WYD pilgrims had higher levels of religious practice and stronger beliefs when compared to other Catholics. This was largely a result of the manner in which WYD pilgrims were selected to go to WYD and suggests a variety of types of WYD pilgrims.

A useful distinction can be made between two types of WYD pilgrim. Type A pilgrims are conventional, in the sense that they are typical of international pilgrims who attend WYD. They are not from the host country and have usually been part of some type of selection and preparation program. Any observer at WYD can easily see groups identifying themselves as type A pilgrims by the multitude of national and regional flags on display each marking a group. In isolation their numbers are relatively small but in a mass gathering every three or so years their numbers can grow quite considerably. Type B pilgrims are exceptional, in that they are resident in the host country, or live very close by, and form a large national group. The need for this distinction arises out of the different preparation and experiences foreign and indigenous pilgrims have of WYD. To illustrate this point consider Australian secondary school participants at WYD as an example. Typically a number of thousand Australians attend WYD.³ A large number of these are students in Catholic secondary school students (Rymarz, 2007). A school may financially assist one or two students to attend WYD. In order to be selected pilgrims need to meet a number of criteria one of the most important of which is some connection with a worshipping community. This distinguishes them from other Catholic youth who typically are not part of such groups. Prior to departure, due to manageable numbers, the pilgrims are usually involved in an extensive preparation program and there is some type of follow up after the event. Type B pilgrims only arise in the WYD host country or

places in very close proximity where there are no significant logistical barriers to overcome before attending WYD. WYD 2008 will be held in Sydney. Individual Australian Catholic schools, in this exceptional case, may send hundreds of students to WYD rather than one or two. The Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, for example, plans to send 15,000 secondary students to WYD 2008. By comparison fewer than 250 secondary school students from the Archdiocese went to WYD 2005.⁴ This has implications for the background of pilgrims and how much preparation they receive prior to the event. The WYD experiences of type A and type B pilgrims therefore need to be treated differently.

Type A WYD pilgrims may be part of a small, but significant subgroup of Catholics who display an elevated commitment to religious beliefs and practices compared to other young adult Catholics. This may not represent particularly strong religious beliefs and observances, relatively speaking, but one that is at a higher level than what is typical. Fulton (2000) described this type of young adult Catholic as *Core Catholic* and they are distinguished by their involvement in wider Catholic networks such as parishes and their readiness to identify themselves as Catholic. Hoge et al. (2001) in their classification of young adult Catholics used similar terminology to describe two types of religious expression: *Church as Choice Catholic* and *Core Catholic*. Core Catholics are described as the ten percent of their sample who have a less individualistic approach to religious belief and practice, take seriously papal teaching (even if they disagree with it), pray daily and regard weekly Mass attendance as a key marker of Catholic identity. Carroll (2004) has coined the term *New Faithful* to describe a tendency amongst some young adult Christians to identify strongly with traditional religious positions. Rymarz and Graham (2007) have found amongst some Catholic adolescents a strong familial pattern of religious belief and practice. This can be described as a tendency to closely identify with the beliefs of parents as opposed to more typical communitarian or less committed modes of religious expression.

A critical issue is how relatively high levels of religious commitment can be sustained from youth into young adulthood and what role WYD could play in this. One way of

conceptualizing how this may occur is to think in terms of developing credible plausibility structures (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Wuthnow, 1992). Unless religious beliefs and practices can be seen as plausible then they are unlikely to be sustained as the person matures. One important aspect of a viable plausibility structure is how well individuals are supported by other like minded peers (Smith and Denton, 2005). Alone an individual can feel isolated but if they are aware of others who share their views this makes their beliefs much more plausible. This is especially true if the beliefs are contentious and demanding. As well as a type of diffuse communal support from a number of others, a strong supportive social network can give young adults access to significant mentors, who could ease some of the transitional issues that religiously committed people face as they move toward more adult expressions of faith and the influence of family lessens (Meyer, 1996; Wuthnow, 1999; Keysar et al, 2000). Having access to a network of others who share similar core values and participate in similar practices also allows the individual to gain a strong affective affirmation of their beliefs (Baron, et al 2000). Religious commitment in this context becomes something which can bring joy and fulfillment, giving the young adult involved a reason for seeking to take their interest to a deeper more committed level.

Another aspect of plausibility is the ability to articulate and defend beliefs. To believe or do something but not be able to provide a plausible reason, in the face of what can be hostile comment, can leave the individual in a weak position. Many religiously committed young people have difficulty doing this as their cognitive understanding of religious beliefs and practices has not developed, or at least has not kept pace with their cognitive understanding in other parts of their lives (Astley and Francis 1996; MacLaren, 2004; Walshe, 2005). One consequence of this is that religious beliefs do not give subjective reinforcing benefit and become distant from the everyday life of the person and they may become vulnerable when exposed to alternate belief systems . An appropriate forum for strengthening the cognitive understanding of belief systems is a supportive environment where individuals feel secure and where questions can be answered by competent figures who know both the appropriate theology and how to relate to young people. Many young Catholics are not in an environment where many of

their issues can be dealt with (Flynn and Mok, 2002). In these circumstances significant issues tend to be ignored or solutions arrived at which place ongoing religious commitment at some peril. Religious concepts, argumentation and vocabulary need to be reinforced and repeated if they are to be strengthened.

This study will examine type A Australian pilgrims who attended a WYD when they were over the age of 18. It will begin with the premise that most of those attending WYD represent a sub group of young Catholic adults and in particular it will explore their experiences of WYD in the light of developing plausibility structures. An especial point of analysis will be on the role WYD plays in strengthening religious belief and practice. The study will seek to explore the background of type A WYD pilgrims and their dominant experience of the event. As the focus here is on the interplay of WYD attendance and developing plausibility, the research targeted those pilgrims where this is most likely to occur, those who have had a strong, positive experience of WYD.



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Methodology

The study was conducted within a qualitative theoretical framework which sought to encourage participants to give in-depth responses arising from a dialogue between researcher and participant. Interviews were conducted with young adults who met the following three criteria: were over 18 when they went to WYD, had a strong positive experience of WYD and were prepared to talk about their experiences.

Participants were contacted, initially, through WYD offices which exist in most Australian dioceses. These offices have records and access to people who have participated in WYD. The heads of the WYD offices in seven dioceses, representing a balance of urban and regional areas were written to, informing them of the project and asking them to pass on an invitation to WYD pilgrims who fitted the three selection criteria. Interested individuals were contacted by the researcher and a time and a place for interviews was arranged. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format (Minichiello et al., 1995). Four general probe areas, with appropriate funnel questions, were investigated; background and biographical information, general impressions of WYD, strongest experiences of WYD, life since WYD. Not set limit was put on the number of interviews to be conducted but after forty one saturation had been reached with little new material emerging.

Each participant was interviewed for no more than one hour. The interviews followed a semi-structured in-depth pattern. All interviews were taped and then transcribed. After each interview, participant responses were analyzed in detail, using contemporaneous notes as well as the taped record and thematic response codes developed (Miles and Huberman, 1994). These codes were related to common response categories, and dominant categories identified. These categories then informed the next interview, and response categories and funnel questions became more and more refined (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).

Results and Discussion

Participants in this study fitted well the description of type A pilgrims as a sub set of the wider young Catholic population. Most were active in some type of faith based group and strongly identified themselves as Catholics. With two exceptions all received some type of financial assistance, from direct grants to help in fundraising, to attend WYD. Arising from this many participants remarked at feeling privileged to have attended WYD and that they were made to feel special and important, as one pilgrim put it “we were part of a very select group, all of a sudden being a Catholic and part of the parish was a plus” The feeling of being privileged and selected could be a significant demarcation point between type A and B pilgrims.

Most participants were involved in planning and preparing for the next WYD where many had leadership roles working directly with younger pilgrims. This was seen as a way of extending the WYD experience and also of “giving something back”. A number of participants did not regard themselves as particularly religious. When probed further about their level of commitment it was clear that using indicators of religious commitment such as Mass attendance, the participants had far higher levels of involvement than typical Australian Catholic young adults (Dixon 2003). Some participants, however, did not see their current involvement as unusually intense. This sentiment was well captured by one pilgrim who commented that “I don’t go to confession all that often.” The point being that for most young adult Australian Catholics reception rates for the sacrament of penance are extremely low. It may be that these pilgrims are struggling to define a Catholic identity and an important part of their internal reasoning was that they were not different from other Catholics and see themselves as *regular* people, a point that will be raised again later in relation to mentors available at WYD.

When pilgrims were asked what was their strongest experience at WYD the dominant response category by far was coded as social validation. This was described as a sense of being part of a larger group that had a similar background and common beliefs and who supported each other. This was often contrasted with usual experience. Social validation is critical to establish a religious identity and personal sense of boundary (King et al, 2002). One participant captured this idea in the quote below:

WYD was like a different world. I think it's a fair thing to say we've a bit of a fairly secular society here in Australia you don't get much support for your faith. Suddenly you go to this week of events which is all centred around your faith, and you have hundreds of thousands of people like you there for the same reason and you have this opportunity to share your faith with all different types of people. And it's an extremely strengthening event from that point of view. GD 10

Social validation is a good example of seeing WYD in terms of the *other* experience. This is a well described dimension of the pilgrimage (Dahlberg, 1991; Tomasi, 2002; Voye, 2002). The pilgrim moves from their conventional world to another place that is different not just in terms of landscape but also in terms of the new ordering of social and other relationships. At WYD participants have their beliefs, practices and life choices supported by many others. This is in contrast to their conventional experience, where the religiously committed young Catholics are in a distinct minority, who do not forthrightly raise issues that may draw attention to themselves (Rymarz and Graham, 2006b). Social validation has clear ramifications for religious plausibility. Beliefs are more plausible when they are shared with others. In their conventional world many type A pilgrims feel isolated. Their construction of reality is governed by social networks that do not support strong levels of religious affiliation. At WYD pilgrims enter a different reality where they can talk about their religious beliefs and have questions answered. At the very least this can allay fears and give them a far greater confidence. It can also opens up new understandings and bring the religious knowledge of the pilgrim onto a more equal footing with other areas of expertise in their lives.

Although many WYD pilgrims may have passed through or still be part of Catholic institutions such as schools or post secondary colleges they are not typical of Catholics of their own age (Mason et al, 2007). Many are aware of the tension in being a committed Catholic when most Catholics around them have only a nominal affiliation (Rymarz and Graham, 2005). To give one example, some participants recalled being at Catholic schools and being one of the few students to attend Mass and that this had made them feel uncomfortable. What is at play here is a type of threefold sociological dissonance (Merton and Barber, 1963). Type A pilgrims are aware of some personal conflict with a wider secular culture. As well there is the dissonance between themselves and more typical Catholic young adults. An awareness of this can lead to existential questioning that can undermine a fledgling religious commitment. The argument *why should I go to Mass every Sunday when nobody else does and it's so boring* is crude but relentlessly strong. In terms of plausibility there are difficulties associated with being part of a group which seems to have no sense of boundary. If there is little to distinguish active Catholics from others then the motivation for maintaining a stronger identity is diminished. This tension is increased if experience of liturgy and other faith based activities is less than ideal and does not leave a lasting affective imprint. There is a tendency in these situations to try and minimize the cost of religious commitment by becoming less involved (Stark and Finke, 2000).

At WYD, by contrast, vast numbers of young adults publicly attend Mass and the other sacraments. Religious topics and concerns are discussed. Participants are not on their own or part of small minority. Moreover those around them seem to enjoy the experience of taking part in religious rituals and freely discussing issues. To use Smith's (2007) terminology Christian life has been transformed from lacklustre to transcendent. What had been marginal, problematic behavior in the conventional world has become accepted life giving and cathartic in the other world. Pilgrims are now forever aware that there are other young people, with a similar background, seem to believe and practice what they believe, and who have closely aligned aspirations. This identification with a larger group can have a strongly reinforcing effect. Whilst never seeing themselves as part of the majority many WYD participants can now identify with a plausible

counterculture, which has critical mass. As one WYD participant succinctly put it “at WYD I realized the Catholic Church is bigger than Australia it’s all over the world. I mean I realized there are other people like me and you don’t have to be embarrassed to be a Catholic”. To see many others, peers from all over the world, affirming what you believe and practice has a strong validating impact and makes religious belief and practice far more plausible. In some ways this is analogous to having an interest in a particular activity but not having many like minded people to share your passion. When you get the opportunity to meet others who share your interest then this reinforces your position and makes your appreciation for the activity grow.

Flowing from this social validation is affective affirmation which was another powerful aspect of the other of WYD. Recent research has highlighted the importance of the emotions in social life (Goodwin et al, 2001; Turner and Stets, 2005). Many pilgrims expressed the strongest experience of WYD as the sheer enjoyment of the event, what was coded as affective affirmation but which one participant accurately called “the whole buzz factor”. The joy and wonderment that came with the WYD was again different from their previous experience of worship and communal fellowship. An indication of the power of the WYD experience was the number of participants in this study who are heavily involved in planning for future WYD and have been involved for many years. Ongoing involvement in WYD planning also allows pilgrims to network with others who have shared the experience. The fact that taking part in events like WYD with its strong religious overtone again makes belief more plausible as it is seen as being tied to events that give joy and satisfaction. It also gives a counterpoint to times when religious commitment does not lead to good experiences because at least the person knows what is possible. One participant put it in these terms:

WYD was just a great time – the singing, the dancing the letting go. I have never laughed so much, prayed so hard or felt that I was part of a group that loved me for who I was... at youth group it’s just so boring. PW 4

A manifestation of the affective affirmation of WYD was the evangelical tone of many events, which while an emerging trend in global Catholic worship, is not typical of parish

life in Australia (Allen, 2007). This point could be explored at greater length but what is being stressed here is the contrast between what happens at WYD and the conventional parish or worshipping experience of the pilgrim. Many of the participants in this study spoke about their conventional experience when they worshiped or socialized in a religious setting. The term used overwhelmingly to describe these events was “boring”. Contrast this with WYD where worship and fellowship are transformed into something exciting and exhilarating. At WYD gatherings contemporary music is used and pilgrims take part in worship with general enthusiasm. Many participants in the study commented that one of their strongest WYD experiences was seeing other young Catholic adults take a leading role in worship and be prepared to share their faith with others often in the form of public, personal testimony. One telling feature of these leaders was that pilgrims could easily relate to them, as one pilgrim put it, “they were just regular people whose faith was so important to them.” There is no shortage of young adults at WYD who are prepared to act as mentors to others. Mentors play an important role in shaping religious commitment in young adults and are often absent from the lives of many young Catholics (King and Mueller, 2004).

Another dimension of the other experience at WYD was classified as the encounter with metaphysical. In terms of plausibility it makes some sense to be involved in a religion if it can offer what some have called an exchange with the Gods or a chance to encounter the divine (Stark and Finke, 2002). Many pilgrims reported a strong sense of the presence of God in their lives when at WYD in contrast to what they had experienced at home and because of this they started to see religion in a different light. Many were made aware of a religious commitment that can move from an exclusive emphasis on developing a moralistic sense to establishing or improving a relationship with God. At WYD this realignment is achieved by immersing the pilgrim in a richly Catholic culture. What is emphasized are distinctively Catholic beliefs and practices, many of which emerge from a theology that focuses on the divine rather than the worldly. At WYD there is a strong emphasis on reconciliation and eucharistic adoration, pilgrims go to Mass daily, participate in devotions such as the Stations of the Cross, pray the Rosary, are given time to reflect, visit the tombs of saints and other pilgrimage sites and are

introduced to a new litany of Catholic hymns. Priests and bishops are active, available and visible and there is much talk vocational inviting the pilgrim to consider what God is calling them to. All of these practices spring out of a strong sense of the action of God in the world and in the life of the pilgrim. This encounter with the divine is not part of their typical religious experience at home, which tends to be much more social. Here is how one pilgrim expressed this idea.

God became real to me in a way that I never experienced at home. It was like Jesus was really speaking to me, he was really present in the Eucharist and it wasn't just a symbol. I saw that being a Catholic wasn't just about being nice to people. PW 2

Along with this encounter with the metaphysical many pilgrims expressed a renewed interest in getting to know more about their religious heritage. There was a sense that interest in what one termed the “nuts and bolts” of Catholicism which were somewhat tangential and neglected at home were now placed directly in the pilgrims frame of reference. Part of this was attributed by pilgrims to an openness at WYD which many described as the first time their questions and concerns had been addressed. The responses given may not always have been what was desired but the process of being able to ask what one pilgrim termed as “the hard questions” was a new and welcome experience.

This paper introduced a distinction between type A and B WYD pilgrims. What impact WYD has on type B pilgrims has not been addressed here. WYD can make religious belief and practice more plausible for type A pilgrims, those who have a preexisting religious interest. This is achieved by social validation, providing strong affective affirmation and an intense but guided exposure to the metaphysical dimensions of Catholicism. The long term viability of the plausibility structures that emerge at WYD is dependent on how well maintained they are after the pilgrim leaves the other world of WYD and returns to the conventional. When WYD type A pilgrims return they are likely to be re-immersed into an environment where the intensity of religious experience is, understandably, far less. Instead, for example, of often daily Mass attendance at WYD,

typical patterns are far lower. Similarly, the social support they encounter, especially for religious belief and practice should revert to usual levels which are far below what is encountered at WYD. In a similar vein much of the metaphysical aura that is generated at WYD is absent in the conventional world of the pilgrim. Whether the “buzz” created at WYD is sustained is an empirical question that only careful longitudinal studies can address.

¹ The “day “of WYD is the final Mass celebrated by the Pope. Prior to this there are a series of events held over a week or so in the host city. A recent development has seen pilgrims billeted, for a number of days, all over the country in “Days in the Diocese” prior to arriving in the host city.

² The Pope is a key figure at WYD. WYD is seen as his initiative, his encounter with youth. One indicator of his prominence is the ubiquity of papal pictures on display in the host city during WYD. Interestingly in WYD 2005 images of both Benedict XVI and John Paul II were widely seen.

³ There is a lack of precision in estimating numbers who attend WYD both at a local and international level due to a lack of a comprehensive registration system.

⁴ This information was provided by Mark O’Connor, Director World Youth Day Office Melbourne in a personal communication.

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Author

Richard Rymarz is the inaugural Peter and Doris Kule Chair in Catholic Religious Education, St Joseph's College, University of Alberta and a visiting research professor attached to the Quality of Life and Social Justice Flagship at Australian Catholic University. His general area of interest is in how groups pass on religious beliefs, practices and values. He has written widely in areas such as the needs, concerns and aspirations of active Catholic youth, contemporary approaches to religious education and generational issues in Catholic culture. His current research interests include the social and religious dimensions of World Youth Day and the New Evangelization of John Paul II.

Email: rymarz@ualberta.ca