

The social milieu of World Youth Day 08 and Pilgrims’ social ethics

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Abstract

This paper presents preliminary findings from the “Pilgrims’ Progress 2008” Research Project conducted prior to, during and after Catholic World Youth Day, Sydney, July 2008. It explores two aspects of WYD. Firstly, the social milieu surrounding WYD and the extent to which it could be described as a youth cultural event. Did it have the characteristics of a Sacred Rock concert or a fun day out? If not what was it? How did Pilgrims see and experience it?

Secondly the paper explores the social ethics of Pilgrims. It reports on Pilgrims’ recent volunteer activity, including regular community service as well as helping people in need. It explores the extent to which civic orientation and spirituality are related, and seeks to discover whether there have been changes in the way returned Pilgrims relate to other people and the wider community.

This is the third in a series of three papers reporting on the findings of a multi-stage WYD08 research project, “Pilgrims Progress 2008”.¹ In the first two papers the research design is outlined, followed by a description of the demographic profile of the Pilgrims and some of the results of the pre-WYD survey. This paper explores the extent to which WYD08 was influenced by youth culture. This is followed by a discussion of Pilgrims’ involvement in the wider community and their concern for the ethical dimension of social issues.

Now let us turn our attention to the WYD event itself. What was it like? Was it strongly influenced by youth culture?

WYD as strongly influenced by youth culture

A kind of ‘sacred rock concert’?

On the basis of previous research by Gebhardt (2007) on WYD Cologne, some might assume that ‘youth culture’ elements derived from contemporary large

group youth events like rock concerts would have a strong influence on how Pilgrims perceived and responded to especially the large group events . For example, it could be anticipated that would be some drinking to excess, drug use and casual sexual liaisons.

Gebhardt (2007) noted that in Cologne from day one, but especially during the closing ceremony, the Cologne WYD was a blend of classical Catholic doctrinal and liturgical elements with themes from profane pop-culture. We did not witness anything that could be called 'profane pop culture'. While the music at the masses tended to be in a traditional style and at some points even classical, the music before, after and at the concerts fitted in well with modern youth culture, but was still in the religious genre. The concerts were youth oriented and lively with well recognised youth performers on the stage, but they were not 'profane'.

We expected that the youngest age group 15-18 would find the event exciting as a youth gathering because they would have opportunities to meet other young people, to party, to listen to youth music and go sightseeing in Sydney. In the pre-WYD survey and in the interviews, Social Pilgrims stated that they were looking forward to meeting people and being part of a large crowd.² The post WYD interviews and the observations made by the research team during WYD revealed that Pilgrims did indeed enjoy being part of a large event and meeting fellow Catholics from around the world. They also stated that their enjoyment was heightened because WYD provided a safe environment that focussed on a religious experience of which they had a historical and personal connection.

Which parts of WYD could be seen to be a good link with youth culture and so would appeal to young people? Some of the typical features of a large youth gathering include:

- fun – 'buzz'
- large crowds
- paraphernalia
- dramatical
- modern technology
- pop music
- freedom

All of these all were to be found in spades at WYD08. Let us look at some of these items to illustrate this point starting with the 'buzz' factor.

The Fun -Buzz

In almost all the interviews that were conducted by Rymarz (2008) during and after the Cologne WYD, it was apparent that Pilgrims enjoyed the 'buzz'. "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' (p.11)." Andrew Singleton in his address noted that the 'buzz' was one of the things that many Pilgrims were looking forward to.³

We certainly found that Pilgrims mentioned their enjoyment of the buzz also. While everyone seemed to enjoy being part of a large crowd there was a difference between Socials and Devoteds. Socials seemed to enjoy the 'buzz' more, while Devoteds seemed to enjoy being part of a large group of fellow believers to a greater degree.

Different from a Rock concert

Peaceful – no drugs

It was very different from a Rock concert or festival. Pilgrims from all types commented on how much they appreciated that it was drug free and safe:

When you get 500,000 people in one location, you'd expect fights or people getting drunk and starting shenanigans everywhere but I didn't see one bad thing go down at all. *Charlie 18, Social*

Behaviour was more consistent with the expected behaviour surrounding a religious event, rather than a rock concert. As my colleague Michael Mason said, the Pilgrims appreciated the respect and quiet behaviour during the big events.⁴ This point is made in the following comment by a young adult Pilgrim:

I've been to Big Day Outs and things like that and to think it's sort of the same amount of people and everyone, you know, there for the same reason and it was just so different. There was no alcohol, there was no, you know, everyone at World Youth Day was so much more, like it was just a happy, loving environment. *Marie, 23*

The Sydney WYD seemed to be remarkably free from the kind of behaviour associated with the large gatherings at previous WYDs as described by Gebhardt (2007). Why would this be so? There could be a number of possible reasons for this. Firstly, the makeup of the Sydney WYD Pilgrim group was different from Cologne. In Sydney there was very high proportion of strongly committed Pilgrims; and a low proportion of Socials who were going primarily to have a fun time. Those coming from overseas were particularly

committed Catholics, it was expensive and a long way to travel for purely fun reasons. Whereas in Europe WYD is easy to get to at relatively little expense, so Socials would be more likely to go to the 'hype' given it did not involve a huge trip or time commitment. They could just go for the day so were more likely to constitute a much larger proportion of the crowd. Only a very small proportion of Australian Catholic youth came to WYD, with relatively few Socials among them.

A second possible explanation for the lack of 'poor behaviour' by youth at WYD08 was that the number of attendees was much smaller – perhaps less than half the size of Cologne gathering.

The Pope as sacred rock star?

Seeing the Pope was cited as one of the things that people were most looking forward to experiencing at WYD08. Why was this so? Was the Pope seen as a sacred rock star and as a sort of pop-star celebrity by WYD08 Pilgrims as indicated by previous research by Gebhardt (2007)? Our research did not support his findings. It simply was not the case in Sydney WYD. As one of our fellow researchers put it in her field notes, the Pope was regarded by Pilgrims as a significant religious leader who commanded their respect rather than mass hysteria:

Maybe you could call the WYD08 as a celebrity visit in the person of the Pope but there was a respectful adulation and not a noisy greeting for a movie star or hysteria.

Pilgrims said that seeing the Pope was important for a whole range of reasons other than pop star status. What was it about seeing the Pope that was so appealing to Pilgrims? I list just a few explanations given by Pilgrims about why they were so joyful and positive about the Pope's presence at WYD.

A focus for WYD

For some Pilgrims, seeing the Pope made them realise that WYD had really started and so it gave a focus to the event. Although there were many activities prior to the Pope's arrival, the big 'ticket' events like the Stations of the Cross and the Papal Masses were after his arrival. Hayden expressed the view that his arrival gave WYD a focus:

The Pope was one of the main things of going to World Youth Day. It was go to World Youth Day, the Pope's coming, so you get to see the Pope. So it was seeing the Pope is a realisation that World Youth Day is here. *Hayden, 19*

The Pope as talking point – to say you have done it

Pilgrims were enthusiastic at seeing the Pope and waited long hours for him to arrive at each event. They cheered and chanted when the Pope's vehicle went past them and rushed over to the fence to take his photograph. Seeing him was going to be a conversation piece for many young people when they returned home with a photo to prove it. This view was expressed by all type of Pilgrims as represented by Annabelle:

And another thing I enjoyed was seeing the Pope, it's a definite on the list of best things you've ever done, definitely up there. *Annabelle 17, Devoted*

A figurehead of the church

For others like Charlie, the Pope's standing in the Catholic Church and what he represents in this role was very important to their appreciation of his presence at WYD08:

As the head figure of the Church you can't help but feel some sort of light shining down when he's up there speaking as he was. *Charlie 17, Social*

As a protector and 'guide'

Seeing the Pope was the most moving experience of WYD for some Pilgrims. It effected them personally as shown by Austin, who is an Open:

When the Pope hopped off the ship and he made his way along the barricades and up to the stage and he just stood there and everyone was cheering and clapping, well it made me realize that he is out there and he is watching over us. *Austin 17, Open*

Many Pilgrims talked about the Pope's message of peace, hope and the environment. They were inspired by what he said at the events at which he spoke. They felt he was showing them the way to live.

Now I am going to turn our attention to the 2nd part of my paper, namely civic engagement. To set the scene I will firstly discuss the responses to the internet survey which was administered prior going to WYD day. Based on the early analysis of the post WYD interviews and focus groups, I will then examine the changes of attitude or actions of Pilgrims.

Civic engagement

Prior to Going to WYD: Civic Engagement

Let us first examine Pilgrims' attitudes to civic engagement prior to going to WYD.

Our previous research on civic engagement among teens and emerging adults in Australia found that the most devout – especially among conservative Protestants, were also the most socially compassionate and highest in civic engagement (Mason, Singleton & Webber 2007). Other research has also shown that the propensity to participate actively in society in a manner that is intended to benefit others was found to be greater if young people are church members (Wuthnow 1996). Data from the 2002 US National Study of Youth and Religion show that young people who follow one of the world’s traditional religions are more likely than avowedly non-religious youth to lead lives which are positively engaged with the society around them (Smith 2005).

In an Australian study, it was found that religiously involved students were more likely than non-religious students to engage community service and hold normative assumptions about the importance of these activities (Hartley 2001). However, holding religious beliefs does not seem to translate into community participation nearly as well as does religious practice. Religious involvement is an important factor in explaining young people’s civic involvement in that religious membership gives them a value system that promotes altruism as well as the opportunity to practice skills and to become involved in community projects (Metz & Youniss 2005, Smidt 2005b).

On this basis we expected to find in the pre-WYD survey of Pilgrims that various aspects of civic engagement would vary according to level of religious commitment. However it was not quite so clear cut. I am only going to address two aspects today, namely compassion and volunteering.

As indicated in Table 1, the correlations between a factor score measuring social compassion, and other factors summarising five dimensions of spirituality, were low.

Table 1. Catholics aged 15-35: Correlations between social compassion and spirituality measures

	RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE	DOCTRINE	CATHOLIC IDENTITY	MORAL ATTITUDES	PRACTICES
COMPASSION	.245**	.081**	.119**	.098**	.163**
N	7122	7592	7592	7592	7454

** p < .000

This apparent lack of association between social compassion and five spirituality measures is puzzling.

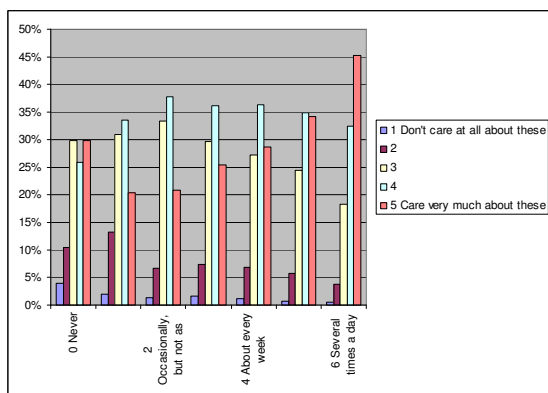
One explanation for this result is that there is only limited variation in the five spirituality dimensions within the WYD sample with most being practicing Catholics and most have high levels of devotion.

The second reason for the lack of strong association is that social compassion is quite high (again without much variation) across all categories of devotion (Charts 1-3). However, the same charts do show that there is a notable peak in social concern at the very highest level of indicators of religious involvement. This vindicates the conceptual link between the religious involvement and social compassion, but does not show up in a correlation calculated across the entire range.

The stronger association shown in our previous research on the spirituality of teens and emerging adults⁵ is explained by the fact that the sample employed in that study was representative of the population, so contained much greater variation on social compassion than the WYD research. The Social Compassion factor was made up of a number of items including the ones shown in the charts.

In the next series of slides, we observe the difference between various aspects of social compassion and aspects of religious commitment. They illustrate the point that the most devout Pilgrims demonstrate the highest level of social concern.

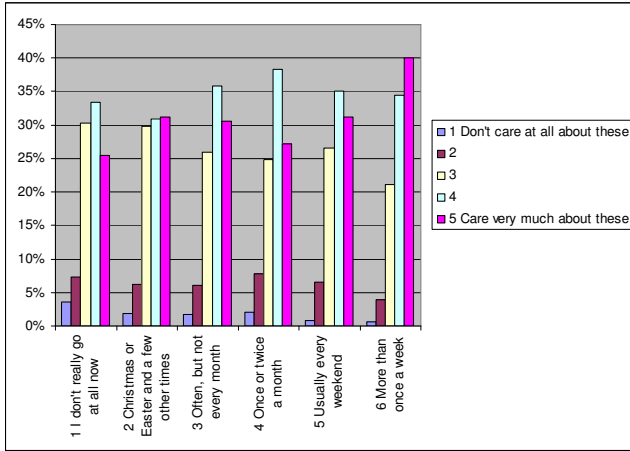
Chart 1. Catholics 15-35: Concern for needs of poor by frequency of prayer (% of pray)



As can be seen by Chart 1, those who pray regularly are more concerned with the needs of the poor than those who either do not pray at all or pray less regularly.

We see a similar pattern in Chart 2 in which we look at the relationship between Mass attendance and concern for the needs of the poor.

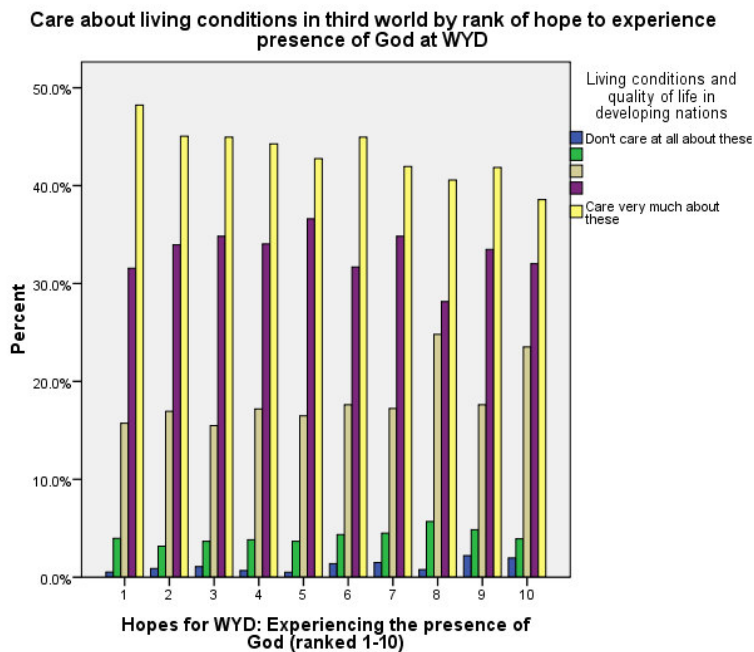
Chart 2. Catholics aged 15-35: Care for needs of poor by frequency of weekend Mass attendance.



As can be seen by this chart, those who attend mass regularly are more concerned with the needs of the poor than those who do not go often.

In Chart 3, we compare the rank order that Pilgrims gave to the question: What are you most looking forward to experiencing at WYD? The possible responses ranged from the social aspects like 'having the most fun' to more spiritual ones like 'Experiencing the presence of God' the item noted in the next slide

Chart 3. Catholics aged 15-35. Care about living conditions on 3rd World countries by rank of hope to experience the presence of God.



Likewise as can be seen by Chart 3, those who hope to experience the presence of God at WYD08 are more concerned with the living conditions of those in 3rd world countries than those who do not have this as one of their aims of attending WYD.

Volunteering

Now let us turn our attention to frequency of volunteering. How frequently did Pilgrims work in a voluntary capacity in a year?

Table 2. Catholics aged 15-35: Frequency of volunteer work.(percent of age group)

	Frequency	Percent
1 Never	1463	19.2
2 A couple of times a year	3384	44.3
3 About once a month	1345	17.6
4 Usually every week	1162	15.2
5 Most days	285	3.7
Total	7639	100.0

Pilgrims were asked: "In the past year, how often have you spent a couple of hours doing community service activities as a volunteer?" Over one third of Pilgrims engaged in voluntary work once a month or more often, 44% a couple of times a year, and about 20% never did so. Volunteering rates were much higher than in the Gen Y study where 71% had done no volunteering in the past month.

The most common forms of voluntary work were fundraising for an organisation (mentioned by almost two-thirds of those who had engaged in voluntary work) and visiting people and spending time with them (about half of the volunteers). When asked about the organisation in which they had volunteered, two-thirds mentioned a parish or religious group such as St. Vincent de Paul (Vinnies), and half named school or some other educational institution.

After WYD

Now let us turn our attention to Pilgrims' comments after reflecting on WYD shortly after their return home. We were particularly interested to examine whether Pilgrims thought that that they related to their friends, family or the wider society differently as a result of going to WYD.

Although social-ethical concerns were by no means in the forefront at WYD, there were a good number of events with this emphasis, so it was an open

question whether participation in WYD would increase this dimension. Returning Pilgrims paid more attention to it than we were inclined to expect.

On the basis of interviews, we can tentatively conclude that there seems to be among returned Pilgrims an increase in awareness of the ethical dimension of social issues, in social compassion and in people's intention for greater involvement. This appears have occurred not just among the most committed, but across all groups.

Impact on the way they relate to others

The returned Pilgrims were asked if they had changed in any way as a result of going to WYD either in behaviour, the way they related to others or the way they viewed their responsibility to the wider society..

No change. Some young Pilgrims said that they had not changed the way they viewed people less fortunate than themselves, nor would anything change in the way they related to other people as a result of going to WYD. This response does not necessarily imply that they were uncaring or made little contribution to the wider society, although for some this may be the case.

Some change. A significant proportion of returned Pilgrims talked about how the spirit of WYD encouraged them to behave more positively to others and to help people both within the Pilgrim group but also in the wider Sydney population. This was not confined to the Devoted and Involved Pilgrims but was across all groups.

Social justice

Some Pilgrims were greatly affected by the social justice part of the Catholic faith and were determined to do more when they returned home and in the following year:

Well I think I said it before in my start up interview that I do the Young Vinnie's Social Justice Group and I'm a member of that and I'm just trying to get involved more with that, trying to take it up a notch. *Austin 17, Open*

One 22 year old Devoted Pilgrim told me that when he returned home he has been to several meetings with the Pilgrims from his parish who are meeting regularly for prayer. They have started a social justice group and are looking for Catholic organisation with whom they can link up.

Ethical behaviour

Some talked about living more ethically as this 23 year old Canadian exchange student said:

I guess it was a reminder, in general I guess to try to live, always live my best and live ethically I guess and I think it could give you a network to know, I think there are people in the world and now I have friends who are there to support you when I think there are decisions to be made.... It encourages more independent research and growth. (*Melinda 23, Devoted*)

Treating others better

Some Pilgrims noted that they were attempting to be reconciled with those with whom they had not had a good relationship prior to going to WYD, or to treat other people, including family members better. For example Sunday and Janice re-thought the ways that they treat other people and were attempting to behave in a way that matched their behaviour with their faith:

I found I'm a lot more humble in a sense, like I've always been very loud and out there sort of a person, but for some reason I just seem to have taken a step down since I came back and I think I have a greater appreciation for other people and thoughts and opinions of those around me. *Sunday 23 Involved*

Every time I go to World Youth Day it helps me re-examine how I act around other people so I think that's been really helpful. *Janice 20, Devoted*

Faith and responsibility link

Some Pilgrims, even a few who were not so devoted prior to WYD indicated that they had a cathartic experience that changed the way they saw and acted towards other people. They made a connection between their Christian faith and their desire to change as indicated by this young Pilgrim:

I think the Masses and stuff was a way for me to look around and go okay well we're here as one, what are they going to be like when they get home and I think, that's my big spiritual thing, I think for me being so into social justice issues, that's my whole spiritual thing, I think I would just like, once I finish school I'd love to go work somewhere with children in third world countries just to help out, give them that sense of hope. *Emma 17, Social*

Conclusion

As indicated earlier, we are yet to finalise the 2nd internet survey and we are still analysing the post WYD interviews. This has given you a flavour of what is to come. It also gives you an idea of what a positive experience WYD was for Pilgrims.

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¹ This is the 3rd paper on our research project in the sequence at SSSR 2008. The first was presented by Dr Andrew Singleton and the 2nd by Dr Fr Michael Mason. The methods employed are interviews of 50 participants prior to going to WYD, an internet survey of those English speaking participants (n=12,275) who were registered by April 2008 and follow up interviews of 26 Pilgrims shortly after WYD. A follow-up internet survey will be conducted late in 2008 or early in 2009.

²² Andrew Singleton discussed this in his SSSR 2008 paper '*Pilgrims' hopes and expectations for World Youth Day 2008*'

³ Ibid

⁴ Michael Mason discussed this in his SSSR 2008 paper '*World Youth Day 2008: Outcomes for Pilgrims*'

⁵ Mason, Singleton & Webber, Op cit.