

RELIGION

■ **CATHOLICISM:** Fr. Adam Wroblewicz shares his experience attending this life-altering event

World Youth Day 2016

Deep in my heart I feel a great explosion of enthusiasm for World Youth Day Krakow, Poland 2016, as World Youth Day has left a profound impression on my whole life.

I left my homeland of Poland after seven years of pastoral work, and came to Canada to minister as a Catholic Priest in the Diocese of Hamilton. My first assignment was at St. Stanislaus Parish in that city.

As you might expect, the first year was a real challenge for me. Everything was new – including culture, customs, and traditions. However, the most stressful experience was that of learning English. I longed for my country and my family. If you can imagine there was no Skype, Facebook or internet at that time like there is today, which is why I was looking forward to my first summer holiday in Poland with great anticipation.

In August 1991 I returned to Poland and stayed with my brother in Silesia. While watching television, I viewed some programs about the approaching World Youth Day in Czestochowa (Poland), where the sanctuary of the Black Madonna is located.

At that time I felt a spiritual struggle. My conscience was bothering me that I had such little interest in the World Youth Day (WYD). I was aware that this event was instituted by Pope John Paul II and that it had already taken place in various parts of the world, but I did not watch any broadcasts nor read the messages by the Holy Father from these events.

My conscience continued to bother me, only this time it was stronger. In a couple of days, the Holy Father was to arrive in Poland and here I was watching TV, having coffee, talking with my family and nothing else was occurring in my heart. How shameful of me. I knew that God bestowed a special grace upon me which was not granted to other people.

It was by the Grace of God, in September 1977, that I entered the Seminary of the Congregation of the Resurrection in Krakow, where I was to begin my studies for the priesthood. At that time, the Archbishop of Krakow was Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, who later became Pope John Paul II. He was loved dearly by the whole archdiocese. Large crowds, especially students and young people, attended Masses celebrated by the shepherd of this royal city and listened attentively to his homilies.

I would like to share with you my three personal meetings with this great Shepherd of Krakow that impacted my whole life. The first one occurred on the Solemnity of



Fr. Adam Wroblewicz

the Resurrection in 1978, which is also the solemn feast of our religious congregation.

Cardinal Wojtyla was celebrating the Eucharist in our Seminary Chapel. At the end of the Eucharist he joined priests and seminarians for a meal. Before his departure he was entertained by our musical group. I played a bass guitar, and at that time I never imagined that I would be performing for the future Pope and Saint. To this day I regret that I never had a photo taken with him. I believe my mind, eyes and ears were kept from recognizing a holy man just like the two disciples, who did not recognize the Lord on the road to Emmaus.

My second meeting with this great man was associated with the Solemnity of the Exaltation of the Cross in the sanctuary of the Cistercian Fathers in Nowa Huta. As a seminarian, I participated in a number of Masses celebrated by Cardinal Karol Wojtyla.

What made a deep impression on me was his close contact with the altar servers. Before each Mass, with joy on his face, he greeted all the servers, exchanged a few words with them, and blessed them. And so it had been for every Mass until one particular Sunday.

At the celebration of the Exaltation of the Cross, in September 1978, Cardinal Wojtyla arrives at the church, but this time things seemed different. The Catholic Church was in mourning after the shocking death of Pope John Paul I, who led the Holy See for only 33 days. Standing in the sacristy I saw him entering, his face radically transformed as he looked serious and thoughtful.

One of the priests unwisely said aloud: "Welcome to the future Pope." The Cardinal told the priest "to be serious" and he immediately went to the altar to preside at the Mass without greeting the altar servers in his usual manner. Perhaps he had a foreshadowing of what was coming as this was one of the last Masses he

would celebrate in his beloved Archdiocese of Krakow. One week later he was on his way to the Vatican for the conclave and the election of a new Pope.

And what of the third faithful meeting? On Oct. 16 the Archbishop of Krakow, Karol Wojtyla, was elected Pope. He took the name John Paul II. The world was in shock, and so was I. A year later the Holy Father arrived in Poland for the first time.

All of Poland, which was under the communist rule, was overjoyed. Every Polish Catholic asked: "What hope can you offer us, our compatriot John Paul II?" In his Papal visit, a Mass was scheduled at the Shrine of the Holy Cross in Nowa Huta — the same church where he prayed before his departure for Rome one year earlier.

Interestingly enough, I was also back on that same site but this time, as a volunteer. Hundreds of thousands of people flocked to the meeting with the Holy Father. It was difficult to control the crowds.

I saw Pope John Paul II's car coming. The Holy Father got out of the popemobile and approached the door that led to the monastery. At a certain point — and to this day I do not know how this happened — John Paul II came up to me, embraced me, and said, "My son." At that moment I was the happiest man in the world.

Because of this unexpected and unusual meeting with the Holy Father I could not sleep all night. But, there I have more to this story. A few days later, my classmate presented me with two pictures and said: "These photos were published in the British newspapers." I opened the envelope to see photos of the Pope with the Cardinal of Krakow on his left and me on his right! I felt like I was on Mount Tabor and recounted the thoughts of St. Peter: "It is good for us to be here Lord. Let us make three tents." To this day, those two pictures are on the wall of my office.

Recalling all of these events and memories during that summer stay in 1991, I thought about World Youth Day in Czestochowa. I said to myself; what am I still doing? Why am I just sitting in front of the TV waiting for the arrival of the Pope? I should go to Czestochowa to welcome him. After all, I am only one hour away by train. I feel like I have been acting like the prodigal son who realized his sinfulness, and I decided to repeat after him: "I will get up and go to my father" -Lk 15:18.

And so it happened. I went to the national shrine of Poland — the Black Madonna. What I experienced during World Youth



Chapel of Pope John Paul II in St. Mary's Basilica in Krakow, Poland.

MIKE DREW/CALGARY SUN/QMI AGENCY

Day in Czestochowa cannot be described. It was a great manifestation of a younger generation living with faith in Jesus Christ.

Do you still remember our World Youth Day in Toronto 2002? It was a wonderful atmosphere of prayer shared with the Holy Father. Young people singing and dancing, smiles and joy wherever you looked. Various cultures and nations all united. Young people proudly holding their flags high (or wearing them), greeting one another in peace, trading gifts, humbly realizing how small their existence is in our big world. It

was an experience of growth to witness so many who share in their convictions.

As the pastor of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Brantford which serves the Polish community I feel extremely thrilled and joyful that another WYD will take place in Poland. We can be sure that Saint John Paul II will be looking down on us from heaven, delighted with young people coming from all over the world to pray and spend time together.

Plans for a pilgrimage to Krakow for WYD 2016 are already underway. The Diocese of

Hamilton and the Congregation of the Resurrection would like to bring 200 young Canadians to Poland. The goal is to get the youth from our diocese to join thousands of others for an unforgettable week of celebrations, sacraments, catechesis, and encounters with Pope Francis.

We do our very best to create a safe experience for those interested between the ages of 18 to 35. The pilgrimage would take approximately two weeks (from July 19 to Aug. 3, 2016). The international program of WYD 2016 in Krakow ends on July 31. We will also visit a number of tourist destinations located around Krakow. The total cost of the entire pilgrimage to Poland is \$2,400.

If you see yourself going on this epic journey and would like to get more information and registration forms, please contact David Dayler at the Discipleship & Parish Life Office at 905-528-7988, ext 2226, dayler@hamiltondiocese.com, or visit our website at www.hamiltondiocese.com/wyd. Initial registration and a deposit of \$100 is due by Jan. 31, 2015.

At the last International WYD in Toronto Pope John Paul II told the 800,000 gathered with him at the vigil, "When, back in 1985, I wanted to start the World Youth Days... I imagined a powerful moment in which the young people of the world could meet Christ, who is eternally young, and could learn from him how to be bearers of the Gospel to other young people. This evening, together with you, I praise God and give thanks to him for the gift bestowed on the Church through the World Youth Days. Millions of young people have taken part, and as a result have become better and more committed Christian witnesses."

Saint John Paul II left a legacy for the youth in his institution of World Youth Day, which Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have faithfully continued, carrying on the hope of their predecessor for the youth of the world, inviting them and commissioning them as Christ's disciples to be God's faithful living witnesses.

I am overjoyed! The World Youth Day Krakow Poland 2016 is coming soon!

— Fr. Adam Wroblewicz, C.R., Pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Brantford



ALESSANDRO BIANCHI / REUTERS

Pope Francis kisses a child as he arrives to lead his Wednesday general audience in Saint Peter's Square at the Vatican April 2, 2014.