

WORLD YOUTH DAY IN DENVER BEARING FRUIT TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER

This past week marked **twenty-five years** since a transformative experience of my young priesthood. While a High School chaplain, I led a group of students to **World Youth Day** in Denver in 1993. We shared space on the bus with some seminarians from St. John Vianney Seminary and youth from St. Helena's Parish in Minneapolis. We all got along famously. I deepened friendships with the priests at St. John Vianney Seminary, with whom I lived and worked as Vocation Director just a year later. Two of Fr. Mark Pavlak's older siblings were part of our larger group, but he himself was still too young! We boarded a long line of buses following a prayerful send off at the University of St. Thomas. It was already after 9:00 p.m. and we proceeded to drive through the night to Chamberlain, South Dakota, that expansive point of the Missouri River, where West River meets East River and the terrain noticeably changes. It is a stunningly beautiful view. Still, true to form, I was studying my Atlas at 3:00 a.m. calculating our exact location and determining an ETA in Chamberlain. I'm old school— GPS has made it too easy!

We attended both the **Black Hills Passion Play** as well as an outdoor Regional Mass for pilgrims from Minnesota, North and South Dakota in Spearfish, SD. We finally arrived in Denver and participated in all the events leading up to the closing Mass. The most powerful moments of the pilgrimage for me included the Stations of the Cross and the Papal Welcome Ceremony at Mile High Stadium. I can still hear the WYD Theme Song (“We are One Body”) ringing in my ear, so catchy and omnipresent it was. I distinctly remember reading instructions explaining a **drawing** to be held for the purposes of the pilgrimage to **Cherry Creek State Park**, site of the evening vigil and closing Mass. As I read, it became evident that the “winners” of the drawing would be assigned the **five-mile** pilgrimage route, while the “losers” of the drawing would take the **shorter route** to Cherry Creek State Park. Clearly, the European organizers did not understand Americans. As one of my students said, “So, if we win the drawing, we get to walk longer in the heat?” That pretty much says it all. Thankfully, we “lost” the drawing, for after all it was 90° and sunny.

Make no mistake about it. Attending World Youth Day is a grueling, but unforgettable experience. There were excellent talks, music, and great interaction among youth from all over the world. Our students were trading pins and buttons and even T-shirts with people who may have never met before. But it didn't seem to matter, for we all shared something in common. We were **Catholic and proud** of it. As I reflect back, the memories remain vivid for the most part. But what is most relevant is how this World Youth Day positively affected the Church in the United States, ways that are still evident today. Consider the youth programs that began here in this Archdiocese and how they have blossomed in the past 25 years, spurred on in significant part by the spirit that flowed from Denver. A whole generation of young people was inspired to become more active in their faith, and the WYD initiative of Pope John Paul II was beginning to catch fire, and is now a regular feature every few years. At the time, many predicted failure, assuming that young people would not travel from other parts of the world to attend. All expectations were blown away.

The success of Denver was precisely in how this Holy Father could inspire youth and young adults to bring their enthusiasm back home with them. Net Ministries was established in the early 1980's, but within ten years was growing rapidly. More than 150 alumni who served on NET teams are living out vocations to the priesthood or religious life. Just one year after Denver, NET (National Evangelization Teams) Ministries expanded to include teams conducting retreats in Canada. NET reached over 95,000 teens last year! Youth Ministry has truly blossomed in the aftermath of Denver. I attended WYD again in Paris in 1997 and Toronto in 2002, not as a group leader, but tagging along as a Chaplain— much less stress!

Yes, that's right— stress! It was not all “cheery” at Cherry Creek Park. When making our trek to the site of the closing Mass, the streams of pilgrims arriving simultaneously from all directions made it very easy to lose sight of one another; unfortunately one young man was separated from our group. Long before the days of omnipresent cell phones, the protocols called for lost pilgrims to visit kiosks spread throughout the park, leaving notes to communicate. I followed the protocol precisely, as did he. I found the kiosk where he had left a note; however, he did not show up at the assigned meeting time. Why? Thinking they were helping, a family invited

him to stay with them at their house across the street from the park! I searched for the “lost sheep” all night long– I didn’t sleep a wink!

Little did I know that he was beautifully cared for, given a home-cooked meal, and watched the Vigil on television. I ended up finding him, but only **after the papal Mass** the next morning on the Solemnity of the Assumption. The family that took him in for the night was able to acquire preferred seating for Mass, so he ended up only about 50 feet away from the Pope! In his homily, the Holy Father said, “Young pilgrims, Christ needs you to enlighten the world and to show it the ‘path to life’ (*Ps* 16,11). The challenge is to make the Church’s ‘yes’ to Life concrete and effective. The struggle will be long, and it needs each one of you. Place your intelligence, your talents, your enthusiasm, your compassion and your fortitude at the service of life!” The WYD in Denver remains a highlight of my priesthood, and its fruits are still with us.

- I must make note of your tremendous generosity to Good Shepherd **Sr. Rose Vang** who spoke a few weeks ago on a mission appeal for Vietnam. You **donated \$14,382** towards her community’s initiatives in Vietnam. I am most grateful!
- A valued parishioner, **Diane Yonga**, is answering a call to serve for three years through the Lay Mission Helpers Association. I invite you to meet Diane at Coffee and Donuts today (8:00 and 10:00 Masses) and consider assisting her in this endeavor. She will embark upon a four-month training program before heading overseas. Informational brochures are available on the tables by the exits.
- The Cathedral welcomes **Stephen Hilgendorf** as our new Director of Faith Formation. I want to offer support and encourage your willingness to step up to assist in our fall programs of religious education for our youth, as well as the RCIA program, which he will direct. Would you consider volunteering in some capacity this year? If so, please contact Stephen through the Parish Office.
- The Pennsylvania Grand Jury report detailing decades of clerical sexual abuse was both shameful and sobering. The only way for the Church to move forward is to acknowledge its sins of the past while ensuring protocols are in place to prevent this evil from occurring again. Let us pray fervently that our response to will be one of transparency and honest dialogue about both the causes and the solutions to these problems.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector