

WYD08 – WORLD YOUTH DAY, part 1

DAY 22 – 15th July 2008

Today was busy, but there is not much to record. We started with breakfast as usual at 8.00 am and then had little to do until 11.00 am when we set off from the hotel walking north (though it feels like walking south) towards the city centre.

In Cologne His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI invited the youth of the world to come to Sydney for World Youth Day 2008. And come they did! From all over the world, we kept meeting groups – some small, some large – from every country around the world. Most could speak English or had a smattering of the language, but all were in good voice. They sang, waved flags, and chanted. The mood was electric. Sydney clearly has never seen anything like it.

Sydneysiders have been somewhat apprehensive about the youth of the world descending on their city, fearing that they would be disruptive (which they are – to traffic), loud (again, which they are), violent (which they are not) and rude (they are wonderfully cheerful).

World Youth Day actually includes the five days leading up to World Youth Day itself on Sunday next.

Gradually the crowds moved to a new area of Sydney – Barangaroo – which used to be a container and warehouse area, but which has recently been cleared and was fenced off into sections to hold up to a quarter of a million young people, along with bishops and priests, as well as everyone else needed to ensure that the Opening Mass would be celebrated in style!



The first thing to do was to feed everyone. Groups of 6 were fed with a hot pie, fruit and a cake along with a drink. Some then caught a nap before the time for the start of Mass approached.

Father Phillip Harries and I moved off to the area where the priests were seated and got vested for Mass, as the sun slowly set. Then we started with an acknowledgement of the Aborigine Peoples, who then entertained us with their didgeridoos and dancing. This lead into the Procession of Cardinals with George Cardinal Pell, the archbishop of Sydney presiding at the Opening Mass. By the time it started, it was already dark,

and a cold breeze came off the water. Many priests were seen putting coats on top of their vestments in an attempt to keep warm.



The Cardinal spoke well in his homily, and I'm sure that reports of the homily will appear in the new reports. He reminded us that unlike the leopard never changing his spots, the Church does recognise that people can change and lead good lives.

The Mass finished after about two hours, and while the crowds were entertained to something of a rock concert and firework display, Father Philip and I moved back to the centre of the city, and positioned ourselves in one of the reconciliation tents near St Mary's Cathedral.

We then spent over two hours hearing the confessions of the young pilgrims. If there is one affirmation that priests receive, it is in the confessional, for there is nothing more humbling, yet satisfying than to absolve someone of what is hurting, holding them and enchainning them in sin. We were very impressed by the young people who came to us.

By the time we finished, we had to take a train back to the hotel, since we were so tired that we needed some help with the walk home.

DAY 23 – 16th July 2008

This morning started with Mass at 7.00 am, so that we would be ready to leave after breakfast. Our destination was Kirribilli in north Sydney. This meant taking a train over the Sydney Harbour Bridge – my first crossing of the bridge itself – though Dominic had by now clocked up several crossings!! I had passed under the bridge on the ferry that gave us a tour of the harbour of course!

At Kirribilli we had the first of our Catechesis Days – we will have three in total. Today it was the turn of a bishop from Oregon, USA, to lead us by talking to us about the Holy Spirit, and taking questions. The English speakers who had gathered came from Wales (naturally), Texas, Brisbane, Korea and Uganda. It was left to the Ugandan contingent to lead the day, though sadly they were poorly organised, and we were almost an hour late starting. They also prepared the Mass that was to conclude the morning, but since I had already celebrated I took a break!! Those who attended found the African singing and dancing a little off-putting, and sadly the musicians

kept interrupting the silent parts of the Mass and adoration, much to the annoyance of those who wanted quiet!! But it was another experience for everyone!



The local parish then provided us with lunch – barbecued sausages, etc. Then we dispersed to different parts of the city. Dominic joined a few others to walk back along the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Later I discovered that he had bought a sleeping bag, so he is serious about sleeping out with the others in the group on Saturday night “under the stars” as a continuation of the Saturday Vigil and leading into the Closing Mass with the Pope on Sunday!!

Meanwhile, a group of us returned to the Sydney Opera House, where there was an open-air concert taking place. There we met the group from the Diocese of Cardiff. Unfortunately they have a much younger group than we do – several are under 18 – and their movements are severely restricted, since the young ones need a constant chaperone!

We wandered for a while together, ending up by having a drink and a light meal. Then Father Philip and I headed for the Convention Centre. We found that the quickest way to get there was to take a taxi – a water taxi – which took us from opposite the Opera House out into the bay, under the Harbour Bridge and right up to the Convention Centre. The driver/pilot/call-him-what-you-will gave us a running commentary as to where we were and what we could see.

At the Convention Centre we spent over two hours again hearing confessions. Again, I was so impressed with the young pilgrims. And I noticed two things that seemed to sum up with spirit of World Youth Day and Confession – everyone came out smiling, and during confessions there was a lot of laughter – from both confessor and penitent! If only that spirit could be taken back home so that people no longer fear confession, but see it as the fulfilling and wonderful sacrament that it really is.

We took a short-cut back to the hotel, and have arrived here exhausted.