



**WORLD YOUTH DAY 2023  
A REFLECTION FROM LUKE THEOBALD**

What is the biggest crowd you have been in? Growing up as a Reading Football Club supporter I've been to matches with 25,000 fans. When I went to Reading festival as a teenager the 90,000 spectators seemed like a gigantic crowd. However, these numbers were like a drop in the ocean compared to the 1.5 million young Catholics that were gathered on the 5th and 6th of August on a beach in Lisbon to meet, pray and attend Mass with the Pope for this year's World Youth Day (WYD).

WYD is an event that occurs every 3 to 4 years where the Pope invites the Catholic youth to come together, pray and celebrate our faith. From July 24th I travelled for 2 weeks with 80 people from the diocese of Birmingham for this year's WYD in Portugal. We spent the first week in Porto, living with families, attending local cultural events and joining in with parish life.

The second week took us to Lisbon and the main events; which involved the Pope's arrival and preaching, language specific catechesis sessions, daily Mass, regular adoration and confession and then finishing with all 1.5 million pilgrims going to a beach for adoration on the Saturday evening, sleeping that evening on the beach before ending with Mass on the Sunday morning. The whole experience was incredibly encouraging to me, both for my faith and in my vocational discernment and it seemed to be a great source of encouragement for others. There is so much to write about, but I would like to highlight just two aspects of WYD that struck me. The first was joy and the other faith.

I'm not sure what you would be expecting if 1.5 million young people all gathered together in one place, but for the Catholic youth it was a simple explosion of joy and community. Dancing, music, friendship and fraternity abounded.

Over the 2 weeks I met and befriended people from all over the world, some from only a few miles away in Reading while others came from South America, the US, Asia and beyond. The sheer number of people from so many nations all sharing this same joy was exhilarating. But this joy, which was visible and tangible shouldn't surprise us. As children of God, joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit and at WYD it was clear that this was a gathering of the children of God united in love of him and one another. I couldn't help but be reminded of the meaning of the word 'Catholic' which simply comes from the Greek word for 'universal' or 'all inclusive'. In the creed we recite 'We believe in one holy, catholic, apostolic church' and the WYD was living proof of the universality of our Catholic faith and its unifying power, expressed in joy.

At the same time as joy what also struck me was the reality of faith. Naturally as the crowds saw the Pope arrive there were roars, cheers, music and joyful exuberance. But during the liturgies a sacred quietness descended. A particular striking moment was on the Saturday evening as the Pope led the 1.5 million in adoration. I was some 2 miles away from the altar and couldn't even see the huge temporary structure that had been built and was reliant on the big screens. However, as the monstrance was brought out for Eucharistic adoration, the huge crowd became silent, many kneeling for the entire hour as we adored the Lord, truly present in the Eucharist.

While this moment was striking for its sheer size, similar events had been occurring the week before. For me a more personal moment came after hearing Bishop Barron giving a talk. He then led the several thousand pilgrims present in adoration in a park in Lisbon. I was struck by the faith of the youth as we knelt in silence for the hour, without kneelers or cushions in a public park praying and adoring the Lord! The visible appearance of so many people's inner faith was such an encouragement to my own faith. Seeing the vast numbers queuing to receive the sacrament of the Eucharistic or awaiting confession was truly an overwhelming sight at times. After two weeks, I was so deeply encouraged that for so many young people their Catholic faith was alive, active and the most important part of their life.

I will end by sharing two of the main points that Pope Francis told us. On his opening night the Pope as he was preaching put his script down, looked out to the crowd and declared that the Church is open to all, all, all! He invited the crowd to respond by crying out all, all, all in response. At the Sunday Homily, preaching on the transfiguration he told the young people to not be afraid, repeating this over and over again. Let's all take inspiration from the WYD, and not be afraid to make our churches places of welcome to all so that all may encounter the real, living and life changing God who loves us.

A final note just to say thank you to the many people who have supported me in attending WYD this year and also supporting me in my vocational discernment. It was a great privilege to join the other pilgrims from Birmingham diocese. Please do continue to pray for me, my brother seminarians but also for our many young people, that they may respond to God's invitation for them and that they may follow God's path for them and discover life to the full.

**Luke Theobald**