

The Youth are the *Now* of the Church

The Spirit beckoned and St. John Paul II heeded when he initiated the now renowned *World Youth Day*, easily the greatest Christian gathering of our time having reached numbers as high as five million pilgrims in Manila, Philippines, 1995. Numbers hardly matter however; it is the 'spirit' of WYD that sends each pilgrim back to their families, schools, varsities, work places, parishes and dioceses with this message: Jesus Christ is Life – and life is good! Apart from our personal encounters with God, we all return bearing the banner of Christ alive and triumphant. We fill the shoes of the witnesses at the Ascension receiving the commission to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). We return with kindled fire in our hearts testifying to the one hope, faith, body, God and Father of us all (Eph 4:5).

WYD 2019 was the 15th of its kind hosted in Panama, Central America, from 22–27 Jan 2019. It saw a total of about 600 000 pilgrims, a large number considering this tiny country with a population of but 4.1 million. The Archdiocese of Johannesburg Youth Department led eighty pilgrims from Johannesburg, Pretoria, Klerksdorp and Polokwane through this momentous occasion, a two-and-a-half year journey which was likely one of the most challenging in our diocesan history. Between combatting very high prices, attempting to visit Mexico en route, erroneous flight destination bookings, visa drama which left two pilgrims arriving late and two left behind, last minute withdrawals and replacements, lawsuit threats, tight budgets and the overwhelming web of unending admin, we tackled each task as it came with nothing but the end-goal in mind. Often "struck down, but not destroyed", we reached the streets of Panama with our famous SA flags hoisted high.

Tasting the contrasting worlds of comfort and anguish we journeyed from 'Days in the Diocese' in *Colón-Kuna Yala* where many slept on floors, endured humid heat, foreign insect bites, cold showers, and the obvious being out one's comfort zone in foreign homes, to the actual WYD week in Panama City where all enjoyed the comfort of 3-star hotels, tasty food from various global franchises, the beautiful sights and culture of Panama City and, of course, encountering our beloved 'Papa Francisco'.

The Holy Father brought the chosen theme, "I am the servant of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38), home to every heart, exhorting the young to say 'yes' to God's invitation in their lives in the *present*, as we are the *now* of the Church. He appealed to the elders of the Church to further echo God's invitation to young people, allowing them to make their mark in the life and mission of the Church *now*, instead of oppressing their gifts, charismas and vibrant initiatives that are so vital for the building of God's Kingdom. A highlight was *Stations of the Cross* led by the Holy Father, as is WYD custom, on the Friday before the Vigil. It was a refreshing adaptation calling the young to see the suffering Christ in the poor and oppressed across the world and further calling them to respond to their needs, to help Jesus carry the Cross through prayer, sacrifice and service.

"Do you want to live out your love in a practical way? May your "yes" continue to be the gateway for the Holy Spirit to give us a new Pentecost for the world and for the Church."
–Pope Francis (closing exhortation during the homily at the closing Papal Mass)

Dillon Naicker