

Słowa kluczowe: Światowy Dzień Młodzieży, Jan Paweł II, Franciszek, Kościół, młodzież

Keywords: World Youth Day, John Paul II, Francis, the Church, youth

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WORLD YOUTH DAY. FROM JOHN PAUL II TO FRANCIS

THE HISTORY OF WORLD YOUTH DAY

The history of World Youth Day is relatively short. The year 1985 was proclaimed by the United Nations the International Youth Year. Pope John Paul II supported this initiative inviting the whole Catholic Church to participate in it. He said then that the Youth Year was an opportunity to show Christ to young people and show them their place in the Church. A year earlier, on Palm Sunday 1984, the Pope entrusted the cross to young people with a request to carry it throughout the world (Pawlina, 1997, s. 9–13).

Before the beginning of the first World Youth Day, John Paul II issued the Apostolic Letter to the youth of the world. For the first time in the history of the Church, the Pope wrote a letter to the youth. This letter, although an official papal document, was of a very personal nature. The Pope wrote a letter to friends – that is how he perceived young people. Since then, it has become a tradition that each year Holy Father writes a letter to the youth sharing with them his concerns about themselves, the Church and the world (Jan Paweł II, 1985, s. 3–4).

Why is World Youth Day so important? Through World Youth Day, John Paul II initiated papal youth ministry and became its leader. He placed the youth in the centre of attention and care of the whole Church. World Youth Days have

become an opportunity to reflect on problems of the young generation. There are two aspects of World Youth Day: religious and social.

In its religious aspect, World Youth Day is an event of faith. Young people from various countries arrive to a set place, experience „universality” of the Church and, moreover, meet faithful peers which helps strengthen their own faith. It was a very important aspect during the years of the communist system. World Youth Days gave young people an opportunity to meet people who had the same beliefs, prayers and lived by the same values. It was of great importance for young people living in the communist states.

But that is not the only aspect of World Youth Days. In a social sense, they have been meant to build interpersonal solidarity and bridges between continents, people and cultures. Thus, young people have become active participants of both social and religious life (Jan Paweł II, 1986, s. 6).

World Youth Days started thirty years ago. It is worth recalling the pilgrimage route of the event. The first World Youth Day was held in 1985. John Paul II invited young people to Rome under the theme: „Have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15). The theme of World Youth Day in Buenos Aires was: „We ourselves have known and put our faith in God’s love towards ourselves” (1Jn 4:16). The theme from Santiago de Compostela was: „I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (Jn 14:6), from Częstochowa: „You have received a spirit of sonship” (Rom 8:15), from Denver: „I came that they might have life, and have it to the full (Jn, 10:10), from the Philippines: „As the Father sent me, so am I sending you” (Jn 20:21), and then from Paris: „Teacher, where are you staying? Come and see ” (Jn 1:38-39). In the Jubilee Year, World Youth Day was held in Rome under the theme: „The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn1:14). Next World Youth Day took place in Toronto and its theme was the words: „You are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world” (Mt 5:13-14). This was the last World Youth Day led by John Paul II. Another meeting was in Cologne under the theme: „We have come to worship Him” (Mt 2:2), the theme from Sydney was: „You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses” (Ac 1:8), and from Spain: „Rooted and built up in Jesus Christ, Firm in the Faith” (Col 2:7) and from Rio de Janeiro: „ Go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19) (Tomasik, 2014, s. 21–27). This year, young people from all over the world will meet in Kraków and the theme of this meeting will be: „Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy” (Mt 5:7).

The popes change and the Church still keeps opening itself to young people. How does it understand its ministry?

THE CHURCH ON THE WAY TO A MAN

In the teachings of Pope Francis, there are three images of the Church. The first one is of the bent over woman. St. Luke says about a woman who „had been crippled by the spirit for eighteen years” and who was bent over and couldn't stand up straight. The Pope uses this Gospel figure to picture the disease of the Church focused on itself. This is the bent over Church but not bent over someone but rather bent over itself – the Church busy with itself and bent down burdened with its own matters... Another image is the image of hope, a picture of disciples going to Emmaus. The Pope used it to show that today the Church loses its hope and experiences a kind of weariness and disappointment. And finally, the third image – of a merciful Samaritan. It is the Church bent over a man on the outskirts of a social life (Draguła, 2013, s. 15–20).

Pope Francis uses these three images from the Gospel to present the Church of „open doors”. It is worth to recall here the words of John Paul II: „Do not be afraid to open wide the doors to Christ”. It was the call to open doors for Christ so that He could enter various dimensions of our life. However, Pope Francis's call to „open the doors” has slightly different meaning – it is about opening the doors of the Church so that Christ can step outside. The Pope calls for reaching out and says: „The Church which does not go out to people sooner or later becomes sick from foul smell of tightly closed rooms”.

The Pope confronts the stolid Church caring only of securing what it holds with the Church which opens up and reaches outside. The Pope says the Church should bring Christ as far as to the outskirts. Benedict XVI said: „Many people live in a desert. This desert takes several forms. There is a desert of poverty, a desert of hunger and thirst, a desert of abandonment, loneliness and ruined love”. Then, Pope Francis uses a metaphor of outskirts. He says: „We need to go to the outskirts where there is pain, bloodshed and blindness”.

Both recent popes are the popes of reaching out with the Gospel. One calls for entering a desert of human existence, another – the outskirts of life. It seems that they both carry inside the same vision of the Second Vatican Council: „Of God who wants to enter this world”.

In this place, it is worth reminding John Paul's II appeal to go out to roads of the world – to the modern Areopagus. All these three popes share the same vision of the Church – the Church sent to change the world from the inside (Kijas, 2013, s.152–157; Grimaldi, 2013, s. 105–109).

WORLD YOUTH DAYS IN THE NEW RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL SITUATION

Jacek Malczewski, a Polish painter from the beginning of the XX century, painted a series of paintings called „The Poisoned Well”. He was a symbolist and in this manner he pictured Poland that lost its independence. These are very important paintings (Kudelska, 2012). But I am moved not only by lost freedom. There are people at the well who have come for water but they cannot draw it. Leaning against the well, they keep waiting. There is water in the well but it cannot be drunk and their thirst is getting greater and greater.

For me, a poisoned well is also a symbol of a young man who cannot establish relation with God in his parish. Leaning against the remains of faith, thirsty, but unable to draw water. He comes to the well but he does not drink.

World Youth Day is a feast of the Church. Ecclesia – it is a meeting at the well. It is an opportunity for young people to draw Water of Life. But is also a chance for the Church to listen to new wishes of today's youth. To listen, and to do something so that a young person could start drawing Water of Life from the well – his or her Church.

In two months' time, the young world will gather by the Vistula river: various people, foreign to each other, from around the world. What do we have in common? The same baptismal holy water which rinses, cleanses and refreshes.

For us, baptism is not just a memory from the past. It is still new and powerful increase of spiritual capital. This meeting of the Church, from which cleansing and healing stream will be running, is meant to remind us about it. This feast of youth is to clear the blocked channels of baptismal grace.

The Church in the eyes of people

When they started to predict the crisis of the Western Church Romano Guardini prophesied that there would come time when the Church would live in people's hearts. It would be a Church reaching much deeper than just on an institutional level. The Church is alive in people's hearts (Guardini, 1922, s. 1; Skrzypczak, 2005, s. 282).

World Youth Day is not only the Church itself, but it is also an expression of experiencing the Church in young people's hearts. Those who have been predicting a catastrophe and describing the young generation as stating: „Christ – yes, the Church – no”, can see for themselves that where Peter and the Word-Eucharist – are, there is the Church there. A spiritual expression of the Church.

It is of great importance that during World Youth Days the catecheses are delivered by bishops. After all, there are so many interesting preachers popular among the youth. No – that is not the point. It is about a sign. The Church teaches and this is the time of experiencing the Church and listening to it.

The role of Peter in the Church – Peter who goes out to cast nests. What an irony. So many others try to catch young people in their nests: marketing experts, profit engineers and all kinds of specialists in tantalizing young people. They seem to almost have them caught but young people go and look for Peter. Spiritual hunger, the hunger for a father who loves...

There is another aspect concerning young people looking for Peter. Once, I read an article where the author said that pope Francis „does not wear a robe of a prophet, but of an enthusiast”. Today, the world needs a spark, new horizons, fresh look and enthusiasm. I think, for many people, pope Francis personifies all these. He makes people recover what they lost and come back from far away and be happy to be back in the Church. This is what it is all about because the Church is permanently „happening”.

Renewed expression of the Church

In this happening of Ecclesia, we can observe a phenomenon of return of silent apostates. In the middle of the XXth century Father Pio warned that more and more people were committing secret apostasy.

In the history of the Church, apostasy took place in various situations. In the first ages of Christianity, apostasy was an event, a conscious act. Return to the Church was conditioned by fulfilling certain penitential practices. Today, more and more often, we witness thoughtless apostasy. People leave the Church and betray Christ, not even thinking about themselves as apostates. People break their connections with the Church without any pain.

John Paull II, in his adhortation Ecclesia in Europa in 2002 said about „silent apostasy of a satiated person” (Jan Paweł II, 2002, nr 9). The process of leaving Christ is growing and the Church becomes the Great Unwanted.

World Youth Days make those thoughtless apostates, or their children, discover the Church not in some juridical form, but in an event: they can experience the Church which is a meeting and a unity. Thus, the Church is reborn in people's souls not as an institution but as an experience of faith. And many of them return to the Church with this image – experiencing Ecclesia. How to accept them in a parish where the Church is also happening? How is it supposed to be happening so that it was an experience of a soul?

Unpredictable results

Of course, many thousand people come to meet the Pope because of various reasons. Some of those reasons are deep but some people come looking just for an adventure, entertainment, or come out of curiosity. But a meeting with Holy Father, a Eucharist and prayer are realities which no-one is able to predict. Some climb a sycamore to see Jesus, others want to touch Him, while still others remain somewhere at the outskirts just to watch. This happening of the Church is unpredictable.

In 1991, a group from the East came to World Youth Day in Częstochowa. One of the participants of the event said: „At last, there came an opportunity to go abroad. I won't deny – I came to Poland to do some petty business. But during those several days in Częstochowa something happened inside of me. Yes, I sold my stuff, but this experience did not end then. Later, for several years, I used to come once a year to Częstochowa. For the last ten years, I've been coming as a priest”.

To climb a sycamore to see Him... Yes, World Youth Day is a symbolic sycamore from which you can see God.

Experiencing God

There is another important matter – the question of passing on faith. Many young people has no experience of God. God is for them an idea, a concept. How to share God which is not mine? Living God...

We are quite efficient in speaking about Jesus on an intellectual level. It is much more difficult to talk about Jesus of my prayer, about Jesus whom I experience. To talk about Jesus in this way one has to experience Him in this way.

Gilbert Chesterton, when speaking about faith, recalls his mother. He says that she often held and cuddled him while saying some prayers. „I can't remember the words but I still carry inside this climate of prayer, this climate of love, closeness and warmth of the prayer” – Chesterton writes.

We organize parish teams for World Youth Day. We teach and instruct the members. But I think that those young people would prefer a priest to kneel down with them and pray. Not saying mass, not giving another instructions. It is about them to experience a prayer with their shepherd.

Once a young man confessed: „We were preparing for confirmation. One of the meeting was celebration of the Cross. During the ceremony, parents put a cross on their children. It was a sign of passing on faith. Parents were passing their faith on their growing children. I remember – said a young man – when my father approached me, looked me into eyes, squeezed my hand, put a cross on my

neck and turned back. I could see that it cost him a lot. He was supposed to pass on faith which he himself had trouble with. After about two weeks, one evening, he came to my room and, after a while, he said. 'Son, I've just been to confession. When I put this cross on you at the church, I felt shame because I wasn't very good to you and I didn't care much for God, either. And I was supposed to pass on faith. That day I put a cross on your neck and today I am coming to pass my faith onto you. I've been to confession'.

Many young people would like to see, hear, experience their priests praying with them. We still have some time before the guests come. Maybe it is worth to start praying with young people so that they could experience God in prayer with a „prayer man” – their priest. And then instructions how to share their faith with guests will not be necessary. They will speak about God from deep down of their experience of prayer. The one, who has experience, also has courage and power of convincing.

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SUMMARY

The article presents the origins of the World Youth Days, starting with the historically first ever Pope's letter to young people in 1985. It reminds of the themes which guided the Days held in the following years. It demonstrates the importance of the World Youth Days consisting in, among others, strengthening their participants faith, strengthening the unity with the Pope, bearing witness to the faith in the world, breaking down cultural barriers, participants experiencing the universality of the Church. The article also shows the diverse context in which the World Youth Day will be held in Krakow in 2016. This context includes the teaching of Francis, contemporary state of religion, perceptions of the Church, etc.