

THE ICING AND THE CAKE – SOME THOUGHTS FROM CARDINAL O'BRIEN AFTER WORLD YOUTH DAY IN AUSTRALIA

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I write this article, following on my participation in the recent World Youth Day in Sydney, Australia – an occasion which should, I think, now be described as a World Youth Day event, rather than just a day because of the tremendous amount of preparatory work which takes place beforehand and because of the great follow up in countries throughout the world.

In looking back on the event from my own perspective, I would divide this major event in the history of our Church to an iced cake – with parts being described as the 'icing', while underneath the icing there is the great solid foundation of the 'cake' itself.

The **'icing' on the cake** was undoubtedly the presence of Pope Benedict XVI at the major events in Sydney beginning with his wonderful welcome in Sydney Harbour. This welcome led on quite literally to a triumphal cavalcade procession through the streets of Sydney. On the Friday of the Pope's visit, Stations of the Cross were conducted at major public sites in the city – this major day of prayer leading on to the Vigil led by the Holy Father on Saturday evening and the culmination of the events in the World Youth Day Mass at Randwick Racecourse on the Sunday morning. Up to half a million young people gathered in the prayerful congregation at that Mass – a celebration marked as much by deep prayerful silences as by the enthusiastic praying and singing of the congregation.

Headlines in national secular papers, along with magnificent photographs, captured the spirit of the occasion. The welcome to the Pope was headlined as: 'Holy Sea', describing the sea of hundreds of thousands of ecstatic pilgrims lining Sydney Harbour foreshore; the headline 'Pain and Redemption' with many photographs of the various stages of the Stations of the Cross was described as 'The day when the Passion of the Christ swept across the heart of Sydney'; 'Mass of Humanity', described the Mass concelebrated by the Pope, 26 Cardinals, approximately 400 Bishops, thousands of priests and up to half a million lay faithful, with the Pope reminding us all: "Tonight, gathered under the beauty of the night sky, our hearts and minds are filled with gratitude to God for the great gift of our Trinitarian faith – unity is the essence of the Church". Each pilgrim will have their own particular memories of those wonderful events. Among my own particular memories were the deep silences at the final Mass – when the Pope was preaching and during the periods of silence both after the Pope's homily and after the distribution of Holy Communion.

However, underlining the ecstatic welcome and the prayer and the praise involved in the above events, I like to think in a special way of the solid foundation to all that took place in Sydney – what I have described as the **'cake' of the celebrations**.

Preparing for the World Youth Day in Sydney was not just something involving the Church in Australia – rather local churches throughout the world were deeply involved in preparing for the event in the host countries – through gatherings of young people in our various dioceses. Obviously, much fundraising had to be accomplished by the young people, as well as the spiritual preparations. I myself was also involved in helping prepare a welcome group of 50 members of the Church of Scotland youth, some of whom had been to two previous World Youth Days and who were preparing at Gillis Centre in Edinburgh for this journey to Australia. In Australia itself, 'days in the Diocese' were prepared for as a preparatory welcome to young people from all over the world to learn more about the practice of the faith in that particular diocese and of the history and culture of Australia – even prior to the major catechetical programmes led by Bishops from all over the world each day of the Pope's time in Australia.

Obviously, churches in the various dioceses of Australia were involved in the preparatory work as well, including much co-operation with both local and national governments. Basically, the whole country was involved with receptions being prepared for leaders, not only in our own Church but also civic leaders from other parts of the world, as well as inter-faith leaders. Along with Archbishop Conti and Bishop Tartaglia, I attended a reception hosted at the British High Commission in Australia by the Right Honourable Helen Liddell, our present British High Commissioner.

After the intense preparations for and the celebrations with Pope Benedict XVI **‘follow-up’ began almost immediately in Australia.**

Having been unable to attend the ‘days in the diocese’ prior to the Pope’s arrival, as I had been leading our Archdiocesan Pilgrimage to Lourdes for the 150th celebrations of the Apparitions of Our Lady there, I was more than happy to visit the Diocese of Wollongong with which Diocese Scotland had been linked. A particular link, of course, was in the person of Father Peter Comensoli, a priest of that diocese, at present studying for a doctorate at the University of Edinburgh. There, along with Monsignor Allan Chambers, who accompanied me, we were taken to various places visited by our young people – and it was with a certain sense of pride that I saw many signatures of Scottish people in visitors books which I myself was asked to sign. As part of this follow-up in Australia, I also met in Wollongong, various pilgrim groups – one from Switzerland, another from France, and one from Italy, each with their priest chaplain – continuing their visit to Australia and, as it were, completing their ‘retreat’ following on the Pope’s mission in their ways.

During these retreats, subjects discussed at the various catecheses centres would come up for further interesting discussion. One bishop told me that during the catechesis which he led – with groups ranging from about 50 to about 4,500 young people – he was asked of the relationship of our Blessed Lady to the Trinity, granted that she was described by the Church as the ‘Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son, and Spouse of the Holy Spirit’!

Since my ordination as Bishop in 1985, I now look back on my participation in 7 World Youth Days; Czestochowa, Poland; Manila, Philippines; Paris, France; Rome, Italy; Ontario, Canada; Cologne, Germany; and now Sydney, Australia – looking forward to the next World Youth Day in 2011 in Madrid, Spain. I asked myself what more could and should we be doing here in Scotland with regard to these major events **which are now part of the Church’s ordinary life** as described so beautifully by Cardinal Pell in his closing speech in Australia.

I would suggest three things:

1. Granted that the question which is frequently asked at parish and diocesan, as well as national level: “Just what is the Church doing for its young people?”, we should ask what other ways are there of involving the young people of Scotland in this major part of the Church’s life.
2. Secondly, we must congratulate our young people on all that they are doing for themselves. I think not only of what they are doing with regard to preparations for and celebrating World Youth Days – but their ongoing apostolate in their parishes and in their dioceses so different from that of many of us in our younger days. I think of the outstanding links which so many of our young people have with the Third World, with Fairtrade, mission apostolate and the local life of their churches, compared with what used to be accomplished when I was a secondary school pupil and a young adult.

3. And thirdly, I ask myself just what more is needed to help our young people at this present time. I would suggest that there must be ongoing catechesis for our young people after secondary school to help them deepen in a special way in their own knowledge of their faith and in the practice of the moral values upheld by our Church. There must be an increase in shared love in family life, as well as in the life of each and every parish and diocese as a preparation for our young people for entry into family life themselves.

When in Sydney I met a second cousin of mine, whom I had not met for the past 20 years. Having completed university, she lived in Paris for some short time before backpacking in Australia with her fiancé. Now Clare and Mark are happily married in Sydney itself, having a young daughter, Eva, of some 18 months, with Clare expecting her next baby. They have grown spiritually through their youth into a stable family life and look forward to bringing up their children strong in their faith. Surely that should be the ambition of each and every young person who has experienced a World Youth Day in some way or another, who has appreciated the value of the 'cake' as well as the 'icing' and who is ready to play their part in the building up of the Church in our country and in our world now and in the years which lie ahead.

Having celebrated one World Youth Day in Australia, I know many of our young people are indeed looking forward to the celebrations in 2011 in Madrid, Spain. May they all receive the help which they need from us, members of the 'mature' Church, as they prepare for their futures, not just in secular life, but as vibrant, enthusiastic members of our Church which must see youth apostolate as central to its life.