The World Youth Day as a Diplomat for the Universal Church

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Picture by Alejandro Espejo LC

During his lifetime Jesus Christ had 12 disciples. At the 37th World Youth Day (WYD) it has been 1.5 million. Taking place from August 1st to 6th in Lisbon young Catholics from all around the world gathered to deepen their faith and connect with fellow believers. While the participants emphasize their joy during the encounter, it offers the Catholic Church the opportunity to strengthen the feeling for the Universal world church in its own youth in

a diplomatic way. Especially in times when individual constituent churches, predominantly located within secularized Western Europe, appear to prefer charting their own course.

A highlight for many was the opportunity to closely witness and engage with the Pope. As one eagerly awaited the arrival of the Holy Father amidst hundreds of waving flags and thousands of other young adults, all collectively chanting "Esta es la juventud del Papa" (This is the youth of the Pope), the concerns, opinions, and tensions within the various ecclesial communities seemed to fade away. Even in the absence of papal presence during numerous program sessions, the joy and enthusiasm remained undiminished.

The week's program was structured by devotions with Pope Francis from the welcoming on Thursday to the stations of the cross on Friday and the huge final mass on Sunday morning. Apart from these central events, there were mainly forms of participation with a cultural or religious nature. The adolescents utilized the waiting periods during the papal audiences and the smaller agenda items to acquaint themselves with fellow young Catholics hailing from the shores of Australia to the frozen tundra of Alaska. They acquainted themselves with global diversity, all of which contribute to the constitution of the world Church. The unifying factor amidst all of this is the shared belief in Jesus Christ and the one holy Catholic Church. In this way, WYD supports cultural exchange and mutual understanding.

While naysayers might assert that this assembly predominantly caters to conservative factions seeking resurgence in the wave of neo-evangelism, they overlook the resonating purpose of unity. Even as these young minds are lectured by bishops in a manner they deem old-fashioned, it serves the overarching goal of nurturing Church cohesion. This cohesion benefits from the fact that every Catholic youth, irrespective of geographical origins, imbibes the same dogma. This rings especially true in contexts such as Germany, where the Church sometimes seems more of a service provider than a custodian of a life-transforming message.

The event raises one's elation and enthusiasm that continues to flourish even after days of poor sleep, bracing cold showers, and queuing for meals, channelling it to ignite the flame of faith. This renewed vitality not only affects the participants but also the Church's mission as a whole. The youth return to their communities invigorated and resolute in their commitment to proclaiming their faith. In this context, World Youth Day functions as a catalyst for the propagation of faith, encouraging young individuals to act as ambassadors of hope and spiritual transformation.

Engaging actively in workshops and sharing testimonies with fellow believers strengthens self-efficacy, potentially motivating them to assume responsibilities within local congregations. Young Catholics are empowered and emboldened to make autonomous decisions and establish initiatives. An example of this is "Nightfever", which emerged after the 2005 World Youth Day in Cologne and now serves as an evening of adoration, pastoral

care, and prayer in 200 cities across 28 countries beyond World Youth Day itself.

In conclusion, World Youth Day sends a message of hope by uniting the youth of the world in a shared journey of faith and promoting a diplomatic network that extends far beyond the event itself. It strengthens not only the personal faith but also the unity of the Universal Church. All without the need for loud rhetoric or the imposition of slogans. It's a celebration that echoes not just in Lisbon's cobblestone streets, but in the hearts and souls of the faithful worldwide.

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