Columns
Horizons
Spirituality



Sr. Kathryn Press, third in the first row, is pictured with pilgrims from the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore at the vigil preparing for the missioning Mass with Pope Francis, during World Youth Day. (Courtesy of Sr. Kathryn Press)



by Kathryn Press

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We left early Saturday morning. Our destination: a converted landfill on the outskirts of Lisbon renamed the "Campo da Graça" or "Field of Grace." Temperatures climbed above 95 F. With the crowds, it took us two hours to walk two miles. Along the way we sang with pilgrims from Mexico. I ran into nun friends from Spain. A French group passed by in matching "Where's Waldo?" T-shirts.

We made it to our allotted section in the field and rested in makeshift tents to avoid the heat. Dust stuck to the sweat and sunscreen covering our bodies. This was the moment we'd been waiting for. World Youth Day, a multi-day event with Catholics from all over the globe, culminates in an all-night vigil and an early morning Mass.

As the evening cooled, we played Uno and swapped trinkets with pilgrims from various countries. People kept coming. Surrounding our group of 35 Irish pilgrims were Portuguese, Italians, Americans and Filipinos. Over the course of the week, I met pilgrims from 62 countries.

After Pope Francis arrived, we had an hour of quiet prayer. Respectful, reverent, still. Groups continued to pour into the field overnight, some even sleeping on the highway. People continue to chat, play soccer, and pray throughout the night.

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Just before 7 a.m., Padre Guilherme Peixoto, a Portuguese priest DJ, came onstage to rouse the crowd. (For the curious, the 30-minute techno concert is on YouTube.) The joy and energy escalated, especially as we looked around to see even more people.

The missioning Mass took over an hour, but the time passed quickly. We listened to simultaneous translation on our phones or radios. Pope Francis encouraged us "to shine, to listen, and to be unafraid." The 86-year-old pontiff spoke directly into the experience of the 20-year-olds around me and into my heart as well.

I didn't go to World Youth Day for a concert or even to see a celebrity. It wasn't about being entertained. Instead, I took a physical journey to mirror an internal, spiritual one. I wanted to come back a different person.

World Youth Day, a multi-day event with Catholics from all over the globe, culminates in an all-night vigil and an early morning Mass with Pope Francis. Sr.

Kathryn Press shares her experience after the vigil. Press says, "The vigil event was 22 hours of sweat, dust, silence, song and joy." (Courtesy of Sr. Kathryn Press)

Altogether, the vigil event was 22 hours of sweat, dust, silence, song and joy. (While walking back was less crowded, it took us longer from the 100-degree heat.) I felt physically exhausted and spiritually renewed.

Yes, young people leave the Catholic Church, and the number of "nones" seems to be increasing, but I've seen a counternarrative firsthand. The 1.5 million young people around me in the Field of Grace witnessed a faith that isn't dead. I believe. Young people believe. It's time to rise up and share this Good News!

This story appears in the **World Youth Day 2023** feature series. View the full series .