Columns
Religious Life



Sisters who connected via the organization Giving Voice meet in person for the first time at the City of Joy during World Youth Day in Lisbon, Portugal. From left are Apostle of the Sacred Heart Sr. Kathryn Press, and Sr. Libby Osgood and Sr. Christa Gesztesi of the Congregation of Notre Dame de Montreal. (Courtesy of Libby Osgood)



by Libby Osgood

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I do not like crowds. Nor am I particularly fond of standing at a booth, having the same conversation with the hordes of people that go by. For these reasons, I was very surprised to find myself with over a million people in Lisbon, Portugal, for World Youth Day, at a vocation fair representing the Congregation of Notre Dame de Montreal, or CND.

Then I remembered that I love to travel, exploring different corners of the world, and discovering the unique beauty of each town, country and culture. The pastel, slender houses of Lisbon remind me of the jellybean-colored dwellings in St John's, Newfoundland. Glossy, ceramic, square tiles are patterned across the statuesque stone structures, evoking tones of the blue delft artwork of Holland. The new and old cobblestones dotting the sidewalks and streets reflect how Lisbon embraces both its history and modernity. It was an ideal setting to gather the young people of our church to embrace our history and look ahead to our future.

Also, I was lured to the epicenter of young Catholics from across the globe because I deeply love the women of my congregation. I jump at any chance to be with them in the visitation spirit of both the Congregation of Notre Dame de Montreal and this year's World Youth Day theme, "Mary arose and went with haste." With my sisters from Cameroon, Honduras, Japan, Canada, and the U.S., we prepared for over a year to staff a vocation booth in the City of Joy, one corner of the festivities, experiencing World Youth Day as vowed religious women rather than attending with diocesan youth.

With the help of Zoom and translators, we proposed memorable visitation experiences with the young people that could include tangible yet environmentally sustainable keepsakes to take with them or trade with other pilgrims. Representing the many cultures of our congregation, our Honduran sisters made sombrero keychains, and our Cameroonian sisters created beaded bracelets. Our Japanese sisters made 5,000 origami peace cranes, and our American sisters enlisted the help of high school students to make wooden finger rosaries.

My Canadian engineering university students used laser cutters to burn wooden keychains with the Congregation of Notre Dame de Montreal logo. Avoiding plastic or single-use trinkets to respect our common home, we couldn't help but bring temporary tattoos as well, which created opportunities to connect beyond language barriers as we applied the cross of the CND logo to forearms enthusiastically thrust towards us.

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To ensure this was a congregational project extending beyond the sisters who traveled to Lisbon, we shared videos of the preparation with all CND sisters, held a multilingual "dispatch" prayer over Zoom to bless the many pilgrims, and once in Portugal, we sent daily reports and photos.

During the three days of the vocation fair, we interacted with at least 100 pilgrims per hour for eight to twelve hours a day. Stunned by the massive crowds, we seven Congregation of Notre Dame de Montreal sisters journeyed together through the trains, metro, buses, and cobblestone streets of Portugal.

While at the vocation fair, close to hundreds of reconciliation booths, we connected with our friends in fellow religious communities and lay organizations. I even met sisters whom I had only known online, connected through Giving Voice, an organization of female religious who are younger than 50 years old. Having communicated in advance through WhatsApp, we intentionally searched for each other. The "City of Joy" was an apt name for the many visitations occurring there!

In one case of being in the right place at the right time, we were standing on the sidewalk on our way to our booth as Pope Francis drove right by us, beaming out the window and waving. As an engineer and oftentimes skeptic, I didn't expect to be as affected by Pope Francis' brief presence as I was. Before this experience, I thought, "He's clearly a special person, deeply spiritual and caring, but he's a person nonetheless, a creature created by God, just like each of us."



Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame de Montreal take a photo after seeing Pope Francis drive by moments earlier during World Youth Day. Pictured in the back row are Srs. Christa Gesztesi, Sue Kidd and Sofia Barrientos Izaguirre; Sr. Sophie Christine Mbougoum in the middle; and in the front are Srs. Libby Osgood, Motoko Takahashi, Idalia Nieto. (Courtesy of Libby Osgood)

However, as he drove by, I must admit, I felt inspired. Every cell in my body vibrated, alive and yet deeply contentedly peaceful. The excitement of the people around me clearly made an impression, but then so did the holy presence of "El Papa," the name chanted throughout the Portuguese streets and crowds.

After the vocation fair ended, the weekend held the vigil prayer service and closing Mass. Many of the more than 1.5 million pilgrims slept in the rocky field overnight, and in preparation, they waited in lines for a bag of food for the 24-hour period before beginning the walk to the site. While I expected a large crowd, I did not anticipate walking on an overpass for 40 minutes to get to our assigned spot, shoulder-to-shoulder with thousands of other people, touching on all sides for the

whole journey. At one point, I was nearly run over by a bus traveling only two miles an hour, containing clergy being shuttled to the front. I now understand how people can possibly be trampled in a crowd.

And yet, amongst the thickest crowds, sometimes waiting for up to an hour for two or three trains to fill until it was your turn, there was energy and joy in the crowd. No one pushed or shoved aggressively. No one was rude or complained. Instead, the young people sang, even in the hot, humid 104-degree weather, and everyone was polite and kind. The locals commented, asking, "Who were these young people all over the city, who were so polite?" Their witness caused the locals to take notice.

Related: At World Youth Day I saw firsthand that young people believe

I was proud to be a Catholic and proud to be associated with young adults who exhibited more patience than I felt capable of. Standing in the melting sun with sweat pouring down, waiting in a two-hour line to get food, only to be told that this particular truck was empty and to find a different line.

No one around me complained. There was no grumbling or impatience, just enthusiasm. Like the Grinch, my once withered heart grew and grew. My tired, impatient, and overheated body was encouraged by the lively spirit around me to do better — to be better.



The sisters' view of the screen at the vigil, through the trashcans, watching Pope Francis' arrival (Courtesy of Libby Osgood)

Once settled in our assigned C12 square, over a mile from the altar, we looked across a row of trashcans toward a massive screen magnifying the action. Despite the distance and ugly view of rubbish bins, the atmosphere around us was infectious, charged with energy and excitement. The vigil experience did not disappoint as the large crowd of people became one great body of Christ. There was excited murmuring before Pope Francis' arrival, cheering when he appeared, and utter silence while he spoke. During the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, it was so silent that the few rebellious conversations were audible. Inexplicably, millions of people were silent in shared adoration.

After the vigil ended, rather than sleeping on the hard, rocky ground, we seven CNDs returned to our hotel, reflecting our age as women in our late 30s and beyond. We decided to experience the Sunday Mass online, while together in the hotel. Later on Sunday evening, we gathered to share what the experience meant to each of us and how we would bring it home to our ministries and our congregation. Translating amongst ourselves between Spanish, French and English, we shared the significance of the week. We were in awe of the youth, grateful to be together, stunned, having seen the pope, and enlivened with his message to be light, to listen, and to show gratitude.

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Having returned home, the chanting of the crowd still resonates with me. "Todos, Todos," the whole crowd sang, echoing the inclusive words that everyone is welcome in the church. An experience like World Youth Day, though absent from secular media, demonstrates that our church is alive. It looks different than it did in the past, but the lament of a dying church should be retired. I experienced a church that was very much alive, vibrant and enthusiastic. We can use this witness of hope and energy to reimagine what our church could be and who we, as Catholics are.

Pope Francis emphasized that everyone is welcome in the church. We have the chance to be light for those around us, and Pope Francis explained that in order to shine or to radiate light around us, we must learn to love as Jesus loves. We need to listen to the hurts of the world, welcome the stranger, and let go of hopelessness so that we might be freed to shine together to be the people that we are called to be

As we look towards Seoul in 2027, my little introverted heart is surprisingly open to returning to the crowds again, just to be among the excitement, the chaos, the discomfort, and the joy that is so infectiously shared at this large gathering of our global church.