

## World Youth Day 2013 Testimony

Whenever something big and God-related happens to me I seem to feel some kind of resistance because obviously there is a negative force that doesn't want us to experience God's awesomeness. For me, it happens in my work life: it seems like I just get so caught up in it I forget to do some of the most important things, like going to church and spending daily time with God in prayer. This is what happened to me before I jetted-off on that plane to Brazil. I remember it so clearly. The last Sunday before I left I was at work and another work dilemma came up and I knew I had two choices - abandon my team and head to the 7pm mass - after all, my finish time was 6:30pm - or help out my team who were very short staffed. Standing at work, I thought "I have no choice." Jesus would definitely not want me to abandon my work team during their time of need but at the same time, my spirit desperately needed the nourishment from Sunday mass.

So getting on the plane heading to Brazil, I was actually quite tired and in a way lacking a sense of why I was going because I just didn't get that time to build up any excitement. I also made sure I didn't have any expectations because as we all know this can only lead to a let-down. So when people asked me what I was expecting I told them I had no idea and I didn't want to know either. I am so glad I adopted the wait-and-see approach because the next two weeks of my life were nothing like I could ever have imagined.

We arrived in Brazil to meet the most amazing Catholic Church community whose great generosity and hospitality touched our hearts in so many ways.

I will never forget one night we had mass and we were invited up on to the altar for a blessing after which Father Dan told us to turn around. Everyone in the church was holding up a sign saying 'Welcome', each with one of our names on it. I was so overwhelmed with happiness and emotion I didn't hear Fr Dan say "Go and find your name". It was so amazing; I didn't know where to start. There was over a few hundred people in there, but off we went to collect our names and hug the people who were holding our cards.

It occurred to me later that they all learnt the word 'welcome'. Just as we were trying to learn words in their language, they were making the effort to learn ours, which was very moving. The Sao Judas parish really did become our home. You know, that home you really want from a church community. Everywhere we went someone from the parish was with us and not out of obligation, but out of really wanting to look after us.

On the four nights we were there we went to a school that had a band playing. We danced with other WYD pilgrims from around the world. Pilgrims come from all over the world and get designated a place to be for their first week which is Mission Week. Ours was Sao Paulo and the parish who hosted us was Sao Judas.

The second week is actually World Youth Day week and we headed off to Rio to join in the WYD activities. There was singing and dancing with all other pilgrims from around Sao Paulo, like a mini concert but with over 300 or 400 people singing and dancing to God. At the end of this concert the priest brought out the Eucharist and we all knelt and followed Christ to the main entertaining area where we had adoration. This was so amazing. The crowd went from being loud and wild, to instantly silent for love of Jesus. This was so touching and the priest reminded us to pray for each other.

I do have to say that in Brazil I really started to appreciate adoration. Before I didn't really have an understanding of what it meant, but now I love it. I now see it as a time of being at peace with God and praying ; before I actually found it hard to get to that place. It's kinda like you don't have that choice – it's just a peaceful moment.

There were so many amazing moments at Sao Judas parish; there was never a day where things weren't amazing. Their parish community is so helpful in the local area. If it was not there the people would truly suffer and not just a little but in big way. The church helps so much in people's lives like after school care, running an orphanage, daycare for the little people, holding mass in the really poor areas, computer liturgy programs, free medical service, dental service, legal service and even a mini-chemist for people who can't afford their script supplies.

In Brazil the poor are really poor, the homes are what we would call unlivable, and the buildings are not safe. Stairs that only children can walk up are what some people live in. There is no way here in Australia these people would be allowed to live in this environment. So the church helps where they can and that's all these people need in their everyday life. This really blew us away - how giving they were as a church community.

We dropped by the local childcare centre which looks after about 80 little children a day. I just remember thinking when they gave us snacks and drinks: "No, keep this for the children" but I realise they actually wanted to really share this with us and that was how they were the whole time we were at Sao Judas - never a burden, they always looked at us as a blessing to have around.

So, as you can imagine, after five days of being in Sao Paulo we didn't want to leave. We had really connected with these people. Our host families were amazing, the

church volunteer amazing and even the regulars who attended everyday mass amazing.

On the last day we had our final mass. I don't think there was a dry eye in that church. I remember thinking, "I'm not going to cry because I will offend these people and it's the last mass together," but anyone who knows me knows that when God touches me I'm crying. That's just how it is for me. So I was naturally holding in my tears until I saw this lady who was just an everyday mass goer, saying goodbye to us and hugging us on the altar. That was it, I began crying, because I knew she really only knew us from seeing us everyday, sitting a few seats behind. That's how these amazing people are; God not only touched us but he also touched them.

I remember asking a friend before I left why the Israelites should have all the fun. In the Word they were always having big gathering to meet in God's name. Now I realised after World Youth Day they must have had the time of their lives.

We headed off to Rio feeling mixed emotions, both sad and happy. We were leaving our new family, but we knew it was not the end, just the beginning and an end to this chapter in our two week journey. Next stop was at Our Lady of Aparecida which is an amazing basilica where we shared an amazing group moment. Then we made our way to Aussie Central in Rio which was going to be our home for the next week. We got there and, no joke, we all said we wanted to go back to Sao Paulo.

After a sleep we got back into the swing of things. Knowing we were going to see our other pilgrim, Bishop Eugene, made it exciting. That was the thing - so much happened in the time we were there I could write a book. God did so much everyday to all of us that words just cannot explain how touched and moved we all were. I've grown in ways I can't ever explain. I now really love being a Catholic; not that I didn't before but now I can truly say we definitely have some wonderful things in our religion.

The next day we had mass at another amazing church in Rio. The best thing about Brazil is every church is beautiful: the paintings, the statues and just the deep sense of identity. This was our first mass in Rio and our last together as the Darwin and Adelaide group until the end of the week. We had been with the Adelaide group in Sao Paulo for Mission Week. It was here where we went our separate ways for the week, not intentionally just because there was so much going on.

Getting over the concept of being in Rio was now sinking into us all. Such a different energy but amazing because everywhere you went there were pilgrims from across the world. Pilgrims were everywhere, even at night.

The next day we went to the St Sebastian Cathedral and this was different again. The church is a dome cone-shaped building. This place was big and awesome and the

Cathedral was packed with pilgrims. Here we ran into our Sao Paulo pilgrims from Sao Judas who we thought we would not see again and from then on it was like they were never not with us and that was great.

That afternoon we made our way to Copacabana beach for the opening mass. This was amazing; it was like thousands upon thousands walking, driving etc. to get to the beach. When we finally got there we took our shoes off and it was amazing: the feeling of sand on our feet; walking up the beach was so beautiful. I actually felt like crying because now we really knew was the week of World Youth Day.

By this time so much had happened to us, God had blessed us so much already and now it was like it was just the beginning of what God was going to do for us.

I loved the mass. I remember thinking, "Wow, we are on one of the world's most famous beaches having mass, how cool is that," and not only that but we were surrounded by thousands of people who not only loved God but wanted to be there. Words can't describe the incredible feeling of being there that night.

We made a new friend that night - a lost Aussie pilgrim joined our trip back to Aussie Central. I remember having a brief chat with our new friend and he really wanted to join our group. I didn't realise until he said these words but we were really a cool bunch of NT groovers, just doing our thing for the love of God.

Over the next few days we made our way back to Copacabana beach for two more events: one was the Pope's message and then the next day, the Stations of the Cross. On Thursday night we found out that the final mass location was cancelled and that it was going to be held at Copacabana beach. The other location had flooded and there were pools of water all over the site. I just remember thinking: "Yes, that's so God will get to have our final mass on Copacabana beach. I bet that's never been done before." From studying tourism you quickly learn this was definitely an event that would be talked about for years. But then there was the concern of logistics, such as toilets. That was one area that Rio either didn't have enough of or it just wasn't in the backup plan. There were thousands upon thousands using what felt like 100 toilets ... you can only imagine!

So on Saturday we headed off to sleep out on the beach. There were so many people on this pilgrim walk it was awesome. Of course this was a shock to the Rio Council because it was obvious it was a quick fix and they did very well I have to say. Just little things you take for granted in Australia with events planning just didn't happen.

We got to the beach, claimed our spot for the evening, still overwhelmed at the thought we were going to sleep there for the night on this amazing beach. We had a backup plan, just in case it rained because that was the original reason why the other location had flooded. Benita had organised an apartment nearby, just a little

bedsitter for us just in case it rained and also to use the bathroom there whenever we needed it. After the Pope's inspirational message that night a few of us walked back to the apartment to use the bathroom. Here I saw people sleeping everywhere.

People were sleeping on the road and footpaths, holding their place for the Pope's drive-by in the morning. I realised then this was true dedication. We had an alternative just in case it rained, but all these people did not have a backup plan - they were there in faith and so I knew at that point I had to sleep on the beach to be a part of this. No matter how cold – and it was cold - I was sleeping with all the other millions who were believers and it turned out to be such an incredible experience.

The next day was the final mass. As you can imagine, the toilet situation was a nightmare once again but I just could not hold on any longer so I decided to go and find one. Off I went halfway through the mass; I left just after the gospel. I just remember thinking: "God, please help me to get back for the Eucharist." I figured I had about 20 to 30 minutes. So I prayed because I knew that these surrounding shops were probably tired of pilgrims using their bathrooms by now; after all, we had been going to Copacabana for 5 days.

I walked and prayed, hoping I would come across a bar. I walked past one bar where the patrons were watching the Pope on TV. Then I got to another and I was standing outside and God knows what was going on here but there was no TV and it looked like girls and boys messing around in really unhealthy ways. I thought that regardless of what they were up to, they'd probably let me use their bathroom. Then it occurred to me, that no less than 100 metres away from these people was this amazing life experience of mass with the Pope and millions of people on their beach, gathering in the name of God and what were these people doing? I became overwhelmed with how sad that was, so instead of stopping, I headed off to the next bar which wasn't far and they were all watching the Pope on TV - and of course they let me use their bathroom. I raced back to the beach in perfect time for the Eucharist, even made it back to the group just as they were going up for communion. Nobody really realised I had gone. However, so much happened to me in those 20 minutes or so.

After mass we made our way back to Aussie Central, packed up our bags and headed to our retreat. We were all so tired we were ready to sleep but luckily Benita was on to it. She knew what was going on. We realised it after not having hot showers for a week. We began to think that this might be our last experience in Brazil. We had a chat about our accommodation and realised it just wasn't suitable for a retreat. I honestly thought we could go back to Rio; I missed Rio already by now. We stayed at the first retreat place for dinner and honestly I was so disappointed I was really glad we left. We took a leap of faith and just before we got on the bus we were told to go to another location and it was perfect, so perfect. We had our own little chapel in the

retreat house, with the most incredible views of Brazil, and hot showers and nice food - the perfect place to reflect on all that had happened.

So much happened to us. I made the most amazing life-long friendships. God put the perfect group together from the NT for us. My new family. They are all the most beautiful and amazing people.

I thought I would go to Brazil and come back with my life turned upside, as you do when God shakes you up but it hasn't happened yet. What I honestly can say is that I really love being Catholic and while I may not know all the rules, or answers or how everything works, I do know it doesn't matter because I can ask God who loves me so much.

Have I changed? Yes. I really have. God has done some real healing for me. Pain has been released, bad habits I didn't even know I had developed have been identified and I am working on them and God has made me deal with a few unhealthy thought patterns. I now feel like I have a really solid relationship with God and even on days when I lack in faith, I'm still talking to God which is just where I need to be.

By Ladan Moradi