



1 Million Pilgrims Attend Benedict's Open-air Mass

By Tracy Wilkinson
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COLOGNE, Germany — They slept in a massive dew-soaked field, packed like sardines, and awoke Sunday under heavy gray skies to hear Pope Benedict XVI urge his youthful followers to live a life of faith and work to spread it.

An estimated 1 million pilgrims from every corner of the planet attended Benedict's open-air Mass, culminating a weeklong World Youth Day and the new pontiff's international debut.

Freedom granted by God "is not simply about enjoying life in total autonomy, but rather about living by the measure of truth and goodness," he told the crowd, offering the central moral prescription of his four-day appearance here.

He lamented a "strange forgetfulness of God" throughout modern society and cautioned that religion cannot be a "consumer product."

"Religion constructed on a 'do-it-yourself' basis cannot ultimately help us," he said. "Anyone who has discovered Christ must lead others to him. A great joy cannot be kept to oneself. It has to be passed on."

The slightly soggy crowd applauded warmly. After a cold night and dark morning, the sun burst through clouds as Benedict started to speak from a gentle hill overlooking the masses, who cuddled in sleeping bags and waved flags of every stripe, star and color.

Nearly 200 countries were represented in the event. World Youth Day was started by Benedict's predecessor John Paul II 20 years ago, and the new pope's presence was seen as a test of his ability to charm the crowds, as well as to achieve his broader agenda of reaching out to other faiths and promoting dialogue.

Benedict had said before arriving here that his goal was to spark "a new impulse" in Catholicism and to show "how beautiful it is to be a Christian." Whether he met that test and will ignite a resurgence in the faith remains to be seen. He did not exhibit the same magical exuberance of his charismatic predecessor. But he did connect to many people on individual levels and deftly handled difficult issues, among them meetings with Jews and Muslims.

The presence of the youth here is organized by churches, dioceses and lay organizations, such as the conservative Opus Dei, which has been especially well-represented.

The deluge of so many young people transformed this graceful city on the Rhine into a mass party and camp-out. Everywhere, groups of 20 or 30 youths snaked in conga lines through city streets, sometimes chanting slogans or strumming on guitars and singing Christian folk songs. They ate free meals on sidewalks and overwhelmed local merchants and the central train station, which had to be closed repeatedly due to crowding.

While some youths are here for fun, many do seek a religious meaning. For them, seeing so many people of the same faith and eager to display it makes the church more accessible and offers the encouragement that comes with having a large peer group.

Shadi Hindaileh, a Palestinian Catholic from the West Bank city of Ramallah, crossed the River Jordan to get here. On Sunday morning, he stood in the field awaiting the pope's blessing. Wrapped in a Palestinian flag and checkered kaffiyeh, he said his encounter with so many like-minded Christians had reaffirmed his turn to a more pious life.

"This doesn't have an effect on everybody," he said. "Not everybody comes for prayer. Some people come just to meet other people and hang out. I used to be like any ordinary person my age, going along with the crowd. Now I am more strict with myself. I attend church all the time and lead a youth group. As the bible says, if God is with you, who can be against you?"

John Sikorski, 20, a junior at Notre Dame University from Park City, Utah, said World Youth Day for him was a life-changing experience.

"You see that the church is young: so many people living their faith," he said in an interview ahead of Sunday's ceremony. "It gives greater courage to me to stand up for my faith, to not be ashamed, to share my faith with others. Especially in a culture that doesn't support what we do as Catholics ¼ and in a society that sometimes thinks Catholicism is archaic and outdated."

"This says we are not alone," he added.

"Seeing so many people, all loving God, it changes you, it really has an impact," said Cynthia Enriquez, 19, of La Puente. Like many, she originally made plans to come here expecting to see John Paul, and was a little disappointed. But, she said, it was "breathtaking" nevertheless to see Benedict.