

## WORLD YOUTH DAY, PANAMA, 2019: AN ESSAY OF CONTRASTS

Joseph W. Spadano, Ed.D.\*  
Associate Professor of Education, Rivier University



Massive crowds at the Panama City Mall. Our first exposure to the MANY nations that attended World Youth Day Panama 2019.

### **A pilgrimage to Panama...**

From January 21 through January 28, World Youth Day (WYD) 2019 was held in Panama City, Panama. World Youth Day (actually a week) is an international event promoted by the Catholic Church. In 1984-1985, Pope John Paul II was inspired to create this religious event with the vision that young people from around the world would converge on a host city without barriers of race, culture, or social class.

Ten Rivier University pilgrims attended this popular celebration, trekking to and traveling through World Youth Day events in Panama City. With the coordinated efforts of Rivier University's Office of Global Engagement, three chaperones and seven students were sent on a pilgrimage from northeastern North America to the southernmost country in Central America to share faith experiences with young people from all corners of the world.

### **For the Office of Global Engagement, the world is its classroom...**

The Office of Global Engagement (OGE) provides its participants with opportunities for a valuable, experiential education through learning experiences that include immersion in culture, language, and customs. These OGE opportunities involve trips to different destinations throughout the whole world. The Panama, 2019, World Youth Day trip stands in stark contrast to every other OGE organized trip. On this trip, instead of traveling to many places around the world, the world was sent to one place.

The WYD pilgrimage brought a unique variety of world cultures to Panama, but one faith. Each different culture shared a similar value: Love your neighbor. At WYD, many different languages were spoken but one message was heard: We are servants of the Lord. WYD pilgrims came to pray and left to serve. Within the enormous crowds at WYD, there were countless customs but one celebration. The WYD witnessed waving flags representing many different countries, but one world united in a religious pilgrimage. At WYD, Panama City was the world's classroom. The learning experiences included opportunities for social, cultural, moral, and spiritual development. The learning outcome of this experiential education was pilgrim's hearts and minds transformed to serve the world.

### **A full day of travel on empty stomachs...**

Our trip began early Monday morning, January 21, 2019. The temperature at Rivier University was a frigid 4° with a wind chill of -15° Fahrenheit. The short walk from the Muldoon parking lot to Memorial Hall in that blustery cold weather was the beginning of a long journey's day of travel delays. Winter storms wrought havoc on scheduled flights. We hustled through airports and hurried through restaurants only to wait at terminals where expected flight arrivals were inclement-weather non-arrivals.

The time spent in airports gave opportunities for our pilgrim travelers, who previously may not have known each other, to become well acquainted. Late Monday evening when we landed in Panama City, the temperature was 80° Fahrenheit. We left morning winter in Nashua and arrived to nighttime summer in Panama.

### **The same moon, but different ...**

The partial moon of the nighttime sky in Panama provided a provocative puzzle. Our first look at a partial moon in Panama City was a visually awkward sight to comprehend. In Nashua, the shadow-line of a partial moon is vertical. In Panama City, the shadow-line of a partial moon is horizontal. The moon's apparent 90° rotation in the sky challenged our spatial reasoning. The cognitive disequilibrium caused by looking at the same, but different moon could only be reconciled by geocentric latitude.

Nashua's latitude is just over 42° north of the equator and Panama City's latitude is just under 9° north of the equator. Nashua's latitude line (42°N) is approximately half the distance from the equator (0°) to the North Pole (90°N). At 45° N, the partial moon's shadow-line is vertical. At the equator, the partial moon's shadow-line is horizontal.

Understanding the effects of geocentric latitude on the moon's appearance in the sky provided the measure of equilibrium necessary to find visual balance. Interestingly, the longitude lines of Nashua and Panama City, 71°W and 79°W, respectively, are not as exaggerated as their lines of latitude. The two cities are approximately 5,000 miles apart located on an almost north-south longitude line in the geocentric coordinate system.

### **A tale of two cities in one...**

Panama City has a towering, downtown skyline that would rival skylines of any major city in the world. Its beautiful coastline architecture is visibly modern and evidences a growing and prosperous economy. The penthouses of the skyline skyscrapers house the richest of the richest Panamanians. The business buildings, exclusive storefronts, and streets of downtown Panama City are clean, well lit, and bustling. Just beyond the financial district and corporate city is the neighboring poverty district and ghetto city. In this neighborhood, contrasting the amazingly magnificent skyscrapers, are villages of broken-down, dilapidated tin-roofed shacks that house the poorest of the poorest Panamanian people.

The contrasting wealth distribution and income inequality of Panamanians is staggering. An estimated 32% of Panamanians are multi, multi-millionaires and live in lavish luxury while 52% of Panamanians live poorly in punishing poverty. Unemployment rates are high in Panama and many Panamanians live only on a dollar-a-day. Multi-million-dollar penthouse suites overlook magnificent Pacific Ocean views and within their view are ghastly ghettos of conditioned poverty.

Hierarchical structures that create massive economic inequities are undeniably protected and preserved. Public schools are not completely free and private schools can only be afforded by the rich, leaving little hope for the uneducated and even less a chance for change. The steady income-flow of wealth in Panama is deceitfully distracted by political corruption. Enormous revenue from the Panama Canal generates hundreds-of-millions of dollars for the Panamanian government but it does little to address Panama's poverty or its suffering people.

### **It must go somewhere...**

Trash cans seem to be everywhere in the USA. Trash cans seemed to be nowhere in Panama. Although there were few trash cans, the streets, parks and sidewalks did not have the amount of litter that would typically be associated with very large crowds. We often walked with our trash, looking for a place to place it, and we usually found ourselves bringing out what we brought in. Nonetheless, there was trash, sometimes neatly piled in places, all of which was somehow cleaned overnight.

On a day-trip, we visited the beautiful, resort island of Taboga, which is a volcanic island, in the Gulf of Panama, that is a short, 30-minute ferry ride from the Panamanian landmark, Balboa Yacht Club. The voyage on the Taboga Express ferried us past the Panama Canal anchorage site, where huge sea vessels awaited their turn to enter the canal from the Pacific Ocean and exit into the Atlantic Ocean.

Surprisingly, trash cans were noticeably difficult to find on Taboga Island. Not so surprisingly, the result was dump piles of plastic bottles, styrofoam cups, and unsightly refuse trashing a wooded section of the island's coast. Judging from the amount of trash, the island's trash piles had not been policed for quite some time.

Regardless, Taboga Island was beautiful. The resort island featured a narrow, sandy dune peninsula with two beaches sporting magnificent views of the Pacific Ocean on each side of the peninsula. One side faced the open Pacific and the other side provided a distant view of Panama City's spectacular, coastal skyline. The sun was expectedly hot, but the water temperature was unexpectedly cold. The

contrasting air and water temperature did not limit beach and water activities that included sunbathing, sea shell and sea glass collecting, swimming, hydro-biking, kayaking, and paddle surfing.

### **The practices of faith and religion...**

In its modern religious culture, the appearance of Christianity has become inwardly private and covertly practiced in prayer at Church. Parishioners keep to their own space and quietly participate in Mass. Outside of Church, most of today's Christians tend to blend in the crowd and purposefully appear unnoticeable, seemingly unwilling to be identified as Christians.

At the Panama, World Youth Day 2019, Christianity was overt, publicly prayerful and practiced in open fields with outward expressions of solemnity and passionate praise. With a measure of bold, brave behavior, WYD Christians were politely noticeable while being proudly loud in the streets, the malls, the markets, and the metro, as well as public parks and venues.

An energetic meaning to "celebrating" religious faith was witnessed at WYD. Rather than faith being prayerfully reserved for and within individuals, faith appeared enthusiastically vibrant through group stories and songs being told and sung in the streets as well as the churches. A positive image of faith as public expression was created and further evidenced by grace being said in restaurants and during open-concert venues where religious songs and messages echoed over Panama City's beautiful Pacific Ocean coastline.

### **Crowd identity...**

In today's society, crowd mentality has earned a well-deserved, negative connotation. Commonly witnessed, and too often reported, behaviors of large crowds gathered at venues or events are unacceptably inappropriate. These crowds of people are typically associated with disrespectful celebrations, public intoxication, using offensive language, causing unnecessary property damage and personal injury, resulting in a negative view of "crowd".

The WYD crowd behavior was an example of a positive crowd identity. During the entire time spent in Panama, we never witnessed nor heard reports of any inappropriate behavior. The WYD crowds celebrated passionately but respectfully. Throughout all the enormous crowds, there was no evidence of public drinking, not even an empty beer can on the ground. WYD pilgrims used no unacceptable language, caused no property damage or personal injury to anything or anyone. Despite all the bumping and crowding into the metro, various venues, and streets, the WYD crowds were polite, tolerant, and patient. This positive spirit and respectful crowd behavior defined admirable social values.

Within our small Rivier University group and larger groups of pilgrims, as well as all WYD volunteers, our Panama trip was filled with countless forms of hospitality, encouragement, praise, affirmation, and thoughtfulness. WYD pilgrims were kind, generous, helpful, courageous and respectful. According to best-selling author, Matthew Kelly, these are all Holy Moments. These moments of holiness were refreshing and are, too often, noticeably absent in today's seemingly self-serving and thoughtless society.

### **With great faith comes great doubt and great hope...**

These are certainly troubling and trying times in which we live. World hunger, climate change, divisiveness, global and political unrest as well as economic disparity are just a few of the challenging

issues facing our modern society. Violence has erupted over volatile issues and radicalized beliefs, resulting in record numbers of refugees seeking asylum all over the world.

The Catholic Church, itself, has not escaped these troubling times. The clergy sex-abuse scandal has challenged the faith of even the most devoted Christian followers. Many Catholics have doubted their religious leaders' integrity and have abandoned their Church in response to repeated clergy sex-abuse accusations and convictions. The amazing crowd size and religious passion of young Christian pilgrims at WYD provides hope that faith in Catholic leaders can be restored.

In these trying times, there are many impoverished and disenfranchised people, too many of whom are young people. There are those with, and without hope, who have great doubts and concerns about their futures. Some hopeless youth groups sadly resort to joining gangs and are associated with drugs, violence, and crime to combat their helplessness and hopelessness. Some hopeful youth groups choose to follow Christian pilgrims and are associated with acts of kindness, peace, and love. The WYD group, made up of young people from around the world, was an expression of great hope through great faith.

### **Religious tolerance and a unique, welcoming acceptance...**

Unlike our multi-cultural, pluralistic United States, Panama has one culture and speaks one language. Like all Central and South American countries, Panama's dominant religion is Catholicism, whereas in the United States there are multiple religious faiths. A short walk from our Hotel Benidorm, was a single mosque that stood alone in a neighborhood surrounded by Catholic churches. The mosque was located nearby Santa Maria La Antigua field where hundreds-of-thousands of Christians gathered for WYD events. We often walked past the mosque with its distinguishably noticeable architecture and tall, moon-topped minarets.

On Friday, January 25, 2019, we attended Ways of the Cross presided by Pope Francis. Our Rivier group and hundreds-of-thousands of other WYD pilgrims attended this moving religious ceremony. After leaving the event, on our walk back to Hotel Benidorm, we noticed a crowd of WYD pilgrims being greeted by Muslim clerics at the entrance of their mosque. The clerics held open their mosque doors, welcoming lines of curious Christians who accepted the clerics' invitation to enter and view the inside of the mosque. This literal, peaceful exchange of crossing religious thresholds was a heartwarming sign of religious tolerance and welcoming acceptance of religious differences.

### **Media...**

Understandably, Pope Francis' visit to Panama dominated Panamanian television programming. At our breakfasts, the morning news replayed WYD events, showing various venues of Christian faith, respectfully and energetically spreading messages of hope, peace and love. These positive media messages were a welcome change from the negative media broadcasts in the United States. Television, newspapers, and other forms of how we gather news in the United States, whether liberal or conservative, portray news stories of crime, fatalities and corruption that spread anger, fear and mistrust. Many of today's news programs in the United States are divisive and do not even report the news. They broadcast contentious arguments, not civil debates, over opinions, speculations and allegations, not facts. Upon our return from Panama, we were surprised to learn that there was little, if any, television coverage of the Holy Father's visit to Panama during the week of his WYD visit.



### **The Send-Off Mass...**

Sunday, January 27, 2019, was the Send-Off Mass at Saint John Paul II Field. A contrasting significance of the Send-Off Mass may be in its purpose. The gathered, youthful crowds were not there to send off Pope Francis, it was for the Holy Father to send off the young missionaries of the world to live the motto of World Youth Day: Be servants of the Lord.

This Mass assembled the largest group of all WYD events, estimated at 800,000 pilgrims. For the Send-Off Mass, as it was throughout all the WYD events, massive crowds poured into, and out of, open fields and venues. Narrow gateways that funneled the enormous crowds of pilgrims entering and exiting the events were “politely chaotic” and “patiently hectic” with one exception...when the pilgrims were receiving Holy Communion at the Send-Off Mass. During this time of the Mass, we noticed hundreds of people forming single- and double-file lines in an orderly fashion. These types of orderly lines never appeared at any other WYD event. The absence of confusion and chaos was undeniably noticeable. At first, we thought these were lines of pilgrims leaving the Mass early, but soon learned that the orderly lines were forming to receive Holy Communion.

We had no idea that the Eucharist would be, or could be, served to 800,000 pilgrims. When our Rivier University group joined a line to receive Holy Communion, we noticed that there were hundreds of other long, single-file lines formed, for as far as our eyes could see. Thousands of priests lined the street barriers to offer the WYD pilgrims Holy Eucharist. Somehow, perhaps by divine intervention, pilgrims knew to get into long, orderly lines. The lines moved with amazing efficiency and speed. Unlike every other WYD event, whose crowds moved as mobs in random and arbitrary fashion, communion lines moved consciously and deliberately. In hindsight, this was truly an amazing feat.

### **Thanks...**

To the entire group of Rivier University pilgrims (Suzanne, Alison, Casey, Catrina Jessica, Karina, Michaela, Mikaela and Panayota) who attended this World Youth Day event, my sincerest expressions of gratitude, replete with appreciativeness. You all, in your own special way, contributed to the success of this pilgrimage and made this a trip to always remember.

Thank you to everyone who helped shape this essay, especially Karina, for her fine editing skills. This essay was a group effort from the very beginning.

Our kind thoughts of appreciation to those who made this trip possible. Thanks to students, staff, faculty, administration, and trustees. Many thanks, especially, to Rivier University’s Mission Committee for their encouragement and enthusiastic support of this trip.

A very special thanks to Dey Barriga and Karen Pratt, from the Office of Global Engagement, for their expertise and professionalism in the organization of the WYD Panama 2019 trip. We appreciate how many hours and hours and hours of your time and energy went into the planning of this experiential learning opportunity.

Our heartfelt gratitude to Mariluz Portugal, our International Service Learning (ISL) guide. Mariluz was instrumental for orchestrating our itinerary, providing local awareness, and “speaking” the language in a frank and honest way. Our trust in her judgement was immediate.

Finally, and most importantly, many, many, many thanks to Sr. Paula Marie Buley, President of Rivier University. Sr. Paula’s vision of a Rivier University pilgrimage to Panama, expressed to Campus Ministry, was the seed for this world-is-your-classroom learning experience. Without Sr. Paula’s spiritual guidance and financial support, this trip would not have been possible. We are forever grateful.

### Final thoughts and new beginnings...

Panama was “Panamazing”. In Panama, we saw representatives from every nation in the world and witnessed no barriers of race, color, or social class. In Panama, one message was spoken to the world’s youth in every language: Be servants of the Lord. Traveling to one place and experiencing the vast differences of the world, while at the same time sharing in its similarities, was truly transformational. This enormous world event was culturally awakening and spiritually refreshing. It also kindled grateful appreciation for a very small place called home.

Our group walked 8-to-10 miles to the various WYD venues and walked everywhere to eat, shop, and tour Old Town Panama. That amount of walking took its toll in perspiration, dehydration, blisters, and fatigue, but its rewards were opportunities for social, moral, cultural, and spiritual development. This journey’s blisters will heal, and its dust removed from our shoes, but its memories will remain in our souls forever.

The Sunday Mass presided by Pope Francis, the Bishop of Rome, the Vicar of Christ on Earth, was an experience of a lifetime. For me and, undoubtedly, the entire World Youth Day congregation, receiving Holy Communion that was consecrated by Pope Francis and shared with our Rivier University group, as well as 800,000 other celebrants, was the most memorable and blessed worldly event of our pilgrimage. After the final blessing, Pope Francis announced that the World Youth Day 2022 would be in Portugal. (Time to begin planning our next pilgrimage.) ■

---

\* **JOSEPH W. SPADANO**, Ed.D., received a Bachelor of Science degree from Fitchburg State University and a Master’s Degree and Doctorate from the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Dr. Spadano taught mathematics at Westford Academy and presently is an Associate Professor in the Division of Education and Department of Mathematics and Computer Science at Rivier University. Dr. Spadano was a 2001 recipient of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching, a 2002 recipient of the Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Massachusetts Lowell, and is a National Board Certified Teacher. He is also a proud member of Pi Sigma Upsilon.