

World Youth Day, below the stage

Nicole Sotelo | Aug. 24, 2011

MADRID, SPAIN -- We were only a few hours into the evening vigil and already we had survived the 100-degree Spanish afternoon heat, a lightning storm and torrential rains. It was finally midnight and I slid my rain-drenched body into my sleeping bag, flicked off one by one the giant black biting ants, and settled in for a night with more than 1 million other Catholics who had gathered for World Youth Day.

Earlier in the day, with growing foot blisters and 20-pound backpacks, my friend and I had walked some five miles on a dusty pilgrimage route from the center of Madrid to the Cuatro Vientos Airport on the outskirts of the city, where the Saturday evening vigil and Sunday's closing Mass would be held.



Along the way, we had stopped to unfurl our handmade banner that announced in rainbow letters, "Catholics Support LGBT Youth in Our Church!" Young Catholics stopped their trek to gather up the rainbow ribbons we held in our hands and pin them to their sweat-soaked shirts. A young Spanish priest from Toledo asked us to translate the words of the banner for him. As each word was understood, his mouth curled up into a broad smile and he thanked us for being there.

Afterward, we made our way to the dusty airfield where sunburned pilgrims crowded the asphalt runways, and flags from every corner of the globe sprung up. Someone said that 190 countries were represented. Far ahead, an announcer on stage tried to rev up the pilgrims for Pope Benedict XVI's ensuing arrival for evening prayer.

"Are you excited to see the pope?" pumped the announcer. The crowd barely responded; all were absorbed in conversations that happen when the largest gathering of young people on the planet occurs.

In our section of the airfield, we helped a young man from Uganda raise his flag and we talked with the Malaysians next to us about their long flight. Later, as the summer storm shook heavy rain from the sky, we watched the Germans behind us run in giddy, muddy circles with the fervor that only a faith gathering such as this engenders.

In the morning, we learned that the storm's winds had toppled the tents holding the Communion wafers

reserved for Sunday's Mass with the pope. Somehow, though, there was no lack of communion.



We had been fed all night long in vigil with one another. The shared experience of biting ants and prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, the rain and the reunion of pilgrims from across the globe united us against any controversial teachings that were spoken from the altar, against any disappointing news of toppled tents, against anything that might dampen the spirit or divide us from one another.

That morning as we waited among the sleeping bags and emerging Spanish sunlight, we may not have had wafers for Mass, but we had the real communion that comes when the global church is gathered together. And it was communion enough.

[Nicole Sotelo traveled to World Youth Day to represent Call to Action and Equally Blessed, a coalition of Catholic organizations that advocate for equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the church and civil society.]

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