Bishop Anthony Fisher’s WYD blog for Sunday 28 July

After a week of preparatory catechesis, prayer and penance, and a week before that of community building and missionary work for Parramatta’s pilgrims, at last today (Sunday) it’s World Youth Day!

Most of our pilgrims slept out overnight under the Southern Cross, knowing that if they returned to Aussie Central they would almost certainly not get into the Final Mass on Copacabana Beach the next day.

They spent the night in prayer and vigil, in dance and song, and in the company of fellow pilgrims from every nation on earth. They even had a little sleep, having come well prepared with ground sheets, sleeping bags and what all agreed were the best WYD jackets.

It was only when they awoke that the ‘Parragrinos’ could see what a vast sea of young humanity — three million of them – had joined them to celebrate what would be the second-largest Mass in history.

Though tight-packed the congregation spread out for almost 4km continuously, along the beautiful beach, blessed again, as they had been the night before, with a perfect day for it and assisted by large screens, loud-speakers and English translation on their radios.

After joining the long queues for portaloos, having breakfast, a few of the brave taking a dip in the Atlantic, they prayed the Morning Prayer of the Church that they had learnt so well over the previous fortnight, and they were ready for Pope Francis’ arrival.

He came in his open-sided car, ‘working the crowd’, as they waved their flags and chanted their love of Christ and His vicar, and tossed flags, diocesan T-shirts and other gifts into his car (that will have to stop).

His huge smile, his many stops to kiss babies, his waving and even accepting a sip of tea from one of the youthful enthusiasts, went down very well with all.

“The Church needs you, your enthusiasm, your creativity and the joy that is so characteristic of you!” he declared.

All sorts of bigwigs were with them. From the Church, the Cardinal Secretary of State and the Cardinal Prefects of the congregations for bishops, religious, laity and Caritas.

The presidents of Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia and Suriname (where’s that you might ask), and the vice presidents of Uruguay and Panama also attended.
One very special guest was a few rows behind me at Mass: a severely handicapped tiny baby girl whose parents Pope Francis had met yesterday at the cathedral; at his request they brought their baby forward to be blessed at the Offertory Procession, the proud father holding her high for all the pilgrims to see while himself sporting a T-shirt that read “Stop abortion”.

Reflecting on the theme of this World Youth Day, taken from Jesus’ departing words to His disciples, Pope Francis said: “It was wonderful to take part in this World Youth Day, to live the faith together with young people from the four corners of the earth, but now you must go, now you must pass on this experience to others. Go and make disciples of all nations!”

These experiences, the Holy Father explained, “must not remain locked up in your life or in the small group of your parish, movement or community. That would be like withholding oxygen from a flame that was burning strongly.

“Faith is a flame that grows stronger the more it is shared and passed on, so that everyone may know, love and confess Jesus Christ, the Lord of life and history.”

Mission is an imperative for Christians, not a suggestion, not a recommendation. “Jesus did not say: ‘if you would like to, if you have the time’ but ‘Go’.”

St Paul understood this very well, declaring: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” but this command of the Lord “is born not from a desire for domination or power but from the force of love, from the fact that Jesus first came into our midst and gave us, not a part of Himself, but the whole of Himself, He gave His life in order to save us and to show us the love and mercy of God. Jesus does not treat us as slaves, but as free men, as friends, as brothers and sisters” who naturally share His mission of love.

So there is nothing to fear. Repeatedly evoking the motto “Do not be afraid” of John Paul II, whose shadow was omnipresent at this WYD, the Holy Father said that “when we go to proclaim Christ, He Himself goes before us and guides us. When His sent His disciples on mission, He promised: ‘I am with you always.’ And this is also true for us! Jesus does not leave us alone, He never leaves you alone! He always accompanies you.”

The mission has no borders, no limits, Pope Francis pointed out: Christ sends us to everyone. “Do not be afraid to go and to bring Christ into every area of life, to the fringes of society, even to those who seem
farthest away, most indifferent. The Lord seeks all, He wants everyone to feel the warmth of His mercy and His love.” Missionaires sans frontiers.

The mission is not only a personal one, but an ecclesial one. “Jesus did not say: ‘One of you go’ but ‘All of you go’: we are sent together. Dear young friends, be aware of the companionship of the whole Church on earth and also the communion of the saints on this mission. When we face challenges together, then we are strong, we discover resources we did not know we had. Jesus did not call the Apostles to live in isolation, he called them to form a group, a community.”

That is why we need priests, the Pope explained, to stand in Christ’s place accompanying young people on mission, helping them to become actively engaged in the Church, ensuring they never feel alone.

The mission is to serve. We must ‘sing a new song’. “What is this new song? It does not consist of words, it is not a melody: it is the song of your life, it is allowing our life to be identified with that of Jesus, it is sharing His sentiments, His thoughts, His actions.

“And the life of Jesus is a life for others. It is a life of service ... Evangelising means bearing personal witness to the love of God, it is overcoming our selfishness, it is serving by bending down to wash the feet of our brethren, as Jesus did ...”

“Bringing the Gospel is bringing God’s power to pluck up and break down evil and violence, to destroy and overthrow the barriers of selfishness, intolerance and hatred, so as to build a new world. Jesus Christ is counting on you! The Church is counting on you! The Pope is counting on you!”

Only soon-to-be saint John Paul II had ever drawn such a congregation, not just at the final Mass at the WYD in Manila (maybe 5 million), but at the final Mass at the Rome WYD, his own funeral Mass in 2005, and the final Mass of his historic visit to Poland (all around 2 million).

As if recalling that world-changing event, Pope Francis announced that the next WYD would be held in John Paul’s home city of Krakow in 2016.

Our young pilgrims loved the spiritual parts of the week more than they did the touristy or pop music dimensions. The silence after Holy Communion and the reverence it indicated was palpable. Our young pilgrims are ready now for their mission.