

A giant leap of faith



Saint Joseph students deepen devotion to the church at World Youth Day

Story by Leila de Gruy

KRAKOW, Poland – Nine Saint Joseph Catholic School students found themselves here – thousands of miles away from home – to attend World Youth Day 2016. Students stepped off of a bus on Monday, July 25, and into a city full of life filled with images of Saint Pope John Paul II, Sister Faustina and Pope Francis. Then they stepped up four flights of stairs to find that they would stay at the Green Hostel, right outside of the main market square.

Finally arriving at the Green Hostel was a relief for many, who were exhausted after about 30 hours of travel, flight cancellations, extreme layovers, lack of meals and lost luggage. This travel

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Above: Freshman Nicholas Brillel, one of several Saint Joseph students who attended World Youth Day 2016 in Krakow, Poland, touring the Jewish sector of the city. Brillel and others later toured Auschwitz, a Nazi concentration camp. *Photo by Dena Kinsey/Special to The Bear Facts.*

World Youth Day: Day by day in Poland

By **KIM KAISER**
The Bear Facts

As we began our travels to Krakow, Poland, for World Youth Day 2016, nothing went right.

On arrival at Jackson airport, we learned our flight from Atlanta to Amsterdam was canceled. That was only the beginning.

DAY 1

We traveled from Atlanta to Paris on a sev-

en-hour flight where I was put between two strangers who did not speak English.

From Paris, we were split into three groups. I was in the first group. The second group arrived in Prague an hour later with no luggage. And the third was to leave Paris at 6 p.m. the next day to arrive directly in Krakow.

The first two groups, including myself, took an eight-hour bus ride from Prague to Krakow with another group of 22 from Los

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Top photo: Hundreds of people gathered at Blonia Park in Krakow for the opening Mass of World Youth Day 2016 on Tuesday, July 26. *Photo by Leila de Gruy/The Bear Facts.*

World Youth Day

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began on Saturday July 23 with a flight from Jackson to Atlanta and then from Atlanta to Paris.

The final destination: Krakow, Poland, and World Youth Day 2016 – a worldwide encounter with the Pope that is typically celebrated every three years in a different country. The last World Youth Day was in 2013 in Rio de Janeiro.

Once the group arrived in Krakow on Monday afternoon, they toured the city and Wawel Castle. In the Square, pilgrims met groups from Italy, France, Latvia and almost everywhere else. They also saw various street performers and participated in line dances led by other pilgrims.

On Tuesday, Saint Joseph students woke at 4:30 a.m. and loaded a bus for a tour of Auschwitz and Birkenau – two concentration camps that housed Jews during World War II. The experience was life changing.

Walking the dirt paths and the cobblestone roads through one of the world's most notorious death camps was a heartbreaking experience – but one that also gave hope because it was evident how far race relations had come since the Holocaust.

That night, Saint Joseph students and others attended an opening Mass in Blonia Park. There, about 800,000

people attended for one reason – to honor God.

Wednesday and Thursday were filled with tours of various parts of Krakow, including the Jewish Sector and Oskar Schindler's factory. Schindler's efforts to save Jews from death during the Holocaust was made famous by the award-winning Steven Spielberg film "Schindler's List."

Thursday night of World Youth Day was the highlight of the trip: Wearing rain ponchos and smiles that stretched across entire faces, participants headed to Blonia Park with about 2 million others to welcome Pope Francis.

Saint Joseph students in Blonia Park were roughly 25 feet from where the Pope Mobile drove past; some managed to get as close as 10 feet from the Pope.

On Friday, most of the day was spent at the Tauron Arena, or Mercy Center, where all other English speaking countries gathered to listen to Catechesis talks and participate in a Mass said by Cardinal Timothy Dolan, from New York.

Later, many returned to Blonia Park for Stations of the Cross. Saturday was a much needed free day before heading to Prague and the trip back to Mississippi. Many people arrived back home on Monday, Aug. 1.



Photo by Dena Kinsey/Special to The Bear Facts

Teenagers who attended the World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland, pose by a sign of the city of Krakow. Saint Joseph students in the photo are Julian Brown, Rodney Self, Nicholas Brille and Mackenzie Brown.

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Angeles that had been waiting for us for five hours.

DAY 2

We missed our tour to see where Saint John Paul II lived and, instead, took a much-needed two-hour nap. That was a luxury after spending all night on a bus. Afterwards, we got cleaned and went to breakfast. When we returned from breakfast, we packed for a tour of the city and set out with our guide, Katerina.

On this trip, we learned that Krakow is usually a city of 1.3 million people, a good deal of which are students who attend one of 37 universities. We visited Wawel Castle, dating back to the 14th century. We also went inside of a church that John Paul II frequented and held confession. While there, none other than our Mrs. Dena Kinsey sat in the confessional where Saint John Paul II heard confessions.

DAY 3

Waking up bright and early at 4:30 a.m., we set out for Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau. The bus ride there took two hours. Both camps were an extremely sobering experience. While there, I was constantly wondering if someone had died in the exact place I stood. I wondered what sort of indescribable torture happened in the empty and dark barracks I gazed into. Our tour guide did not spare a detail.

Prisoners were on a diet of 250-300 calories and forced into hard labor day after day. Hair could not be longer than 2 millimeters due to extreme lice infestations that clung to bleeding wounds and skin. Gassing was brought down immediately upon the sick, elderly and those below 3 years old, also known

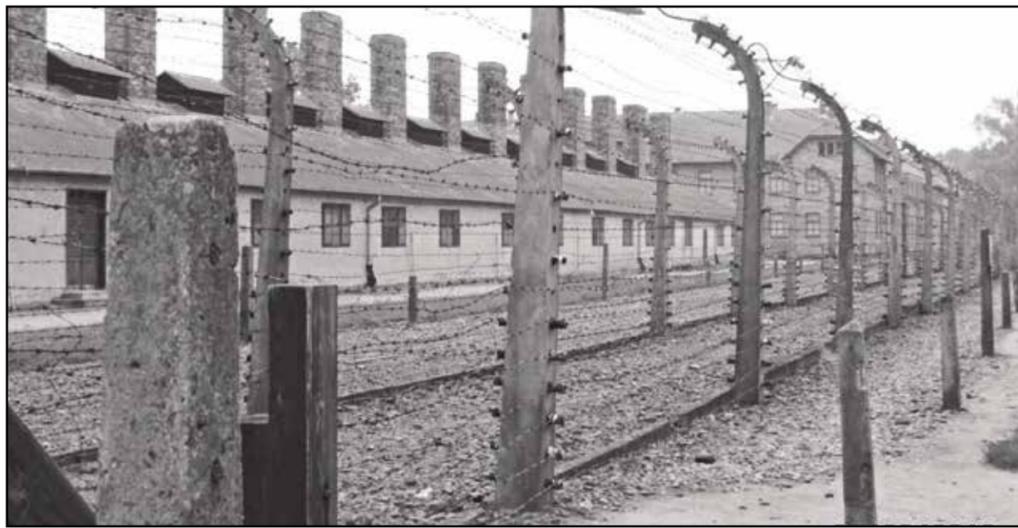


Photo by Dena Kinsey/Special to The Bear Facts

This barbed wire fence separates a street from the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Students attending the World Youth Day in Krakow also toured Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps.

as those unfit to live. Mass executions were common.

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I had never seen so many people in my life. At the opening Mass of World Youth Day, I would guess about 2 million people attended. I was constantly surrounded by flags of countries I didn't even recognize, by songs praising our Lord and Savior, and by other faithful Catholics who had traveled as far from home as I had and endured airports, buses, and unexpected changes.

It was a truly a joyful experience to remind me after visiting such a wretched place that not everything in our world is cruel and evil. There, among hundreds of thousands of people singing and waving flags, I felt at peace.



Photo by Kim Kaiser/The Bear Facts

These 65 chairs symbolize 65,000 lives that were lost in the Jewish ghetto of Krakow during World War II.

“ Most of the gatherings we had been to were carried out in Polish, leaving us utterly clueless save a few moments where we responded with the rest of the crowd in a language we did not understand.”

DAY 4

We visited Oskar Schindler's factory, the remains of the Jewish Ghetto and a small concentration camp the Nazis used solely for extermination of Jews, where thousands of bodies were buried beneath our feet.

To those who do not know, Schindler was a German man who took over a factory formerly owned by a Jewish man to make some easy money manufacturing and selling pots and pans to the warring world.

Over time, he had a change of heart and began buying the freedom of Jews from concentration camps to work in his factory in comparative safety.

Visiting the Ghetto, however, was much more hard-hitting. Very little is left of the original Ghetto, as most of it was bombed down to rubble. But you could feel the suffering and loss that happened there. The Ghetto has a memorial of 65 empty black chairs in the middle of the square, each representing 1,000 lives lost.

DAY 5

We ventured back to Schindler's Factory today – this time entirely on foot the morning after eating in the sadly small Jewish district the night before.

After watching the 1993 movie "Schindler's List," I found the visit to be extremely moving. The factory, now a museum dedicated mostly to the life in the Ghetto and concentration camps, was an eye-opening experience.

Here, you can read letter from Ghetto inhabitants aged between 65 and 5 years old. Replicas were made of bunks, and an entire room had stone walls and rocky ground littered with the personal belongings of Jews to give the sense of being out picking at rocks amongst the prisoners.

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We went back to Blonia Park for a welcoming ceremony with Pope Francis. Somehow, there were even more people there than for opening Mass, which I, coming from Mississippi, could barely fathom.

I saw Pope Francis quite clearly from where we were as he went through in his Pope Mobile. I had a rosary blessed by him at the end of Mass for my beloved Babcia (Polish for grandmother).

DAY 6

We finally got into the massive arena to go to Mass, where they spoke sweet, sweet English. Most of the gatherings we had been to were carried out in Polish, leaving us utterly clueless save for a few moments where we responded

with the rest of the crowd in a language we did not understand.

After the arena, which was nearly packed full with only the English-speaking Catholics at World Youth Day, I went with a group back to the Green Hostel, a place that we called home throughout the duration of the trip, to get some rest.

From there, I went back to Blonia Park to attend the Stations of the Cross with Pope Francis, where our group was at the very front of sector B2, a sector right in front of the altar, giving us optimal seats to view His Holiness.

DAY 7

Today was easily one of the more leisurely days. I would guess that we walked only six or seven miles.

We visited Wawel Castle again. We also explored the city and all it held while most of the pilgrim population camped out over night at Blonia Park at Sleeping Under the Stars.

Sadly, we could not attend because leaving the earlier mentioned event could take up to six hours, and that would mean missing our bus back to Prague the next day. Compared to the days before, the city seemed empty as we roamed it until we settled to eat at a sort of Polish and Italian fusion restaurant in Krakow Square.

rant in Krakow Square.

DAY 8

To make up for our poor attendance to the Sleeping Under the Stars, our group leaders decided to take us on a pilgrim walk on our final day.

A pilgrim walk is exactly what you would expect it to be: walking aimlessly around and constantly getting lost.

This happened after attending Mass in a simply beautiful church dating back to the 15th century that held a relic of Saint John Paul II.

After a while, our walk led us back to the hostel, where we immediately headed back out the Shrine of Divine Mercy, thankfully mostly by tram, to visit a few nearby relics of St. Faustina.

After this adventure, we went back to the Jewish district near our hostel to eat a peaceful dinner before enjoying an authentic Polish downpour of rain into our plates of food.

From there, we went back to the hostel to pack and board our 10:30 p.m. bus with another group from New Mexico.

DAY 9

Our trip back to Mississippi was perfect compared to our trip to Krakow.

We all got home as one group, and we were even led by an escort through the Amsterdam airport to our gate – which we just barely got to in time.

Unlike my first flight across the Atlantic, I sat between my brother and a fellow pilgrim in our group, both of whom spoke wonderfully fluent English.

We faced no life-or-death problems on our journey home, and if there is one thing I am grateful for on this entire trip, it is that.

All in all, this is a trip that I will remember and hold dear forever – from the joys of sharing a room with three half-strangers to watching the flags of 187 countries waving before me.

I am eternally grateful that I was given the privilege to experience this and even hope to one day go with my little sister.

To any who wish to go but are hesitant, please do so. You will not regret a moment of it, even if your feet do.

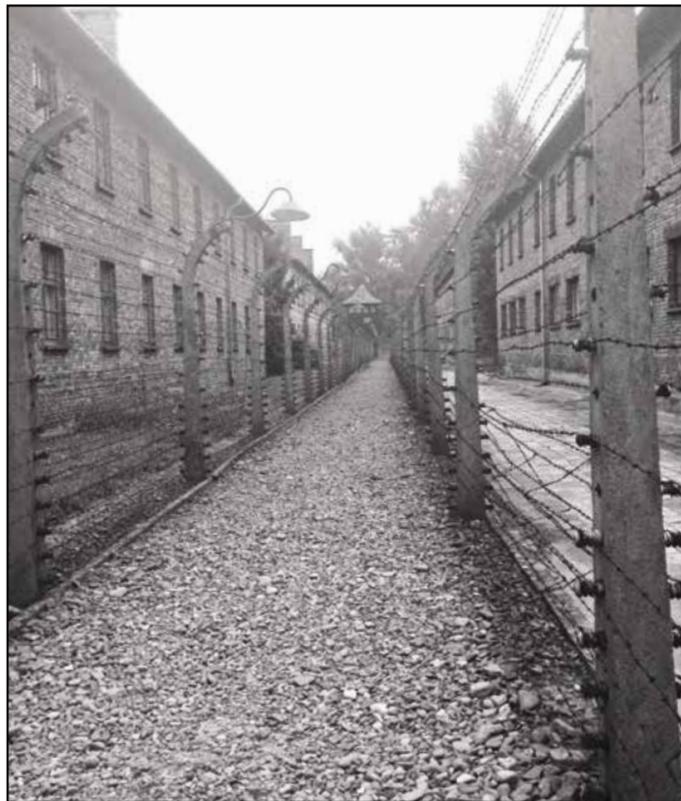


Photo by Kim Kaiser/The Bear Facts

This path separates the barracks on the right from another building on the left at Auschwitz concentration camp.