



# Local youth travelling to Panama discover it's a Small world, *big Church*

By DAVE MYERS

Southwest Kansas Catholic

They went with the excited anticipation of a sure adventure. How could it not be?

World Youth Day 2019, Jan. 22-27 in Panama would include hundreds of thousands of youth from around the world, gathered to celebrate a diverse community, unified in their love of the Lord and the Catholic Church.

"The pope arrived on Thursday and was there until Sunday," said Adam Urban, Director of Youth Ministry for the Catholic Diocese of Dodge City, one of five adults who chaperoned 14 youth from southwest Kansas.

"The pope took a long tour of the town, and people lined the roads," Urban explained. "We got there several hours early and camped out. When the pope went by, we were only five feet away."

Adults chaperones included Urban, Father Jacob Schneider, Seminarian John Stang, Gabriela Tejo, and Lety Trejo. Youth participants included Adan Gutierrez, Diego Chavez, Brian Duran, Alexis Moreno, Anahi Moreno, Alba Najera, Darvin Salas, Jr., Jody Zimmerman, Alexis Trejo, Angela Enriquez, Gabriel Mendoza, Trista Abernathy, Bryan Hernandez, and Jasmin Duran.

Many of the local youth, most of whom were from Satanta and one from Great Bend, had never even been on an airplane, yet suddenly found themselves deep in Central America surrounded by their peers from across the world.

For these young people, the world suddenly became much smaller, and the Catholic church much larger.

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The trip to World Youth Day 2019 in Panama began with an invitation. Then each youth who responded began the process of raising \$3,000 each. About half was donated, and the other half raised through fund drives.

"St. Alphonsus Parish in Satanta really needs to be commended," Urban said. "They rallied around those kids and the trip."

The departing flight was supposed to take the group from Wichita direct to Panama, but an overrun airport in Panama City forced the plane to land in neighboring Costa Rica. The youth were soon to learn why the event was considered a pilgrimage, and not a vacation.

"We had to take a bus-ride hundreds of miles across Costa Rica and Panama that we didn't expect," Urban said with a smile. "There were many more hardships than we anticipated. Anything that is supposed to be easy is made much more difficult when there are a million people. It was a real pilgrimage!"

Did the hardships take away from the experience? If anything, it drew the group closer together. Urban said that through the often-long waits, the participants were able to get to know each other in a way in which they would otherwise never have had the time or opportunity.

The Kansas youth were paired with a group from Oklahoma City throughout the trip. Many strong friendships were forged, Urban said.

"Each of our kids had bags of American goodies. The tradition is when people are standing in line, kids pass out memorabilia from other countries. The kids got to experience cultures from around the world.

"The Church is so much bigger than you imagine in your little parish," Urban said. "The complexity and diversity has a unitive property when united under a common goal, which is the Christian life."



Southwest Kansas youth, including (at right) Jody Zimmerman, left, and Trista Abernathy, were just feet away from Pope Francis when he went by in his popemobile surrounded by thousands of youth from across the globe.



Seminarian for the Catholic Diocese of Dodge City, John Stang, and Father Jacob Schneider, are photographed at the site of the Holy Father's final Mass for the close of World Youth Day in Panama.



Despite the long waits and other unexpected hardships caused when more than a million are "gathered in my name," the youth from Kansas kept their spirits up. At rear is Adam Urban, Director of Youth Ministry.



Pope Francis celebrates the closing Mass for World Youth Day at the St. John Paul II Field in Panama City, Jan. 27. (CNA Photo)

Participants from the Catholic Diocese of Dodge City included Adam Urban, Father Jacob Schneider, Seminarian John Stang, Lety Trejo, Gabriela Trejo, Adan Gutierrez, Diego Chavez, Brian Duran, Alexis Moreno, Anahi Moreno, Alba Najera, Darvin Salas, Jr., Jody Zimmerman, Alexis Trejo, Angela Enriquez, Gabriel Mendoza, Trista Abernathy, Bryan Hernandez, and Jasmin Duran.



Among the adult chaperones are (left to right) seminarian John Stang, Director of Youth Ministry Adam Urban, and Father Jacob Schneider.

## Amid hundreds of thousands of his peers gathered in Panama for World Youth Day, Satanta youth says, 'I had this sense of belonging'

By SEMINARIAN JOHN STANG  
*Special to the Catholic*

Now, I know getting here was not easy," Pope Francis said during his opening remarks at the 34th World Youth Day. "I know how much effort and sacrifice you made to participate in this Day. The many weeks of work and commitment, and encounters of reflection and prayer, have made the journey itself its own reward."

A pilgrimage usually includes difficulty and suffering. No matter the final destination of the pilgrim—whether it be to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, bathing in the waters at Lourdes, or even traveling to a Steubenville Conference—pilgrims will face hardships on the journey. But once the pilgrim reaches his or her destination, the experience is often spiritually life-changing. This distinguishes a pilgrimage from a vacation.

"World Youth Day was an experience unlike any I have ever had before," said Adam Urban, the Director of Youth Ministry for the Diocese of Dodge City.

"It was a true pilgrimage filled with many hardships and grace. To see so many priests, lay people, and students from every nation and background on the earth was a surreal experience."

The Catholic Diocese of Dodge City sent a delegation of 14 youth and 5 adults to World Youth Day in Panama City from Jan. 22-27. The kids worked hard for months to fund-raise for the event, receiving grants from Vibrant Ministries, Catholic Home Missions, and several donations. They also sold food items.

"I am so proud of our youth, our parents, our knights, our parish, and our diocese for coming together to make this happen," said Father Jacob Schneider, parochial vicar at St. Alphonsus and the chaplain

for the trip. "It could not have been done any other way.

"I remember thinking that the amount for this trip was nearly impossible, and my prayer became, 'God, if you want us to go, you have to make it happen.' Well, He did! That was something I will always remember, God's providence playing out before our eyes through the generosity of truly thousands of people."

Many of the pilgrims were high school students from St. Alphonsus Parish in Satanta, and one was from Prince of Peace Parish in Great Bend. The pilgrimage was arranged through Proximo Travel. Dodge City diocese participants traveled with a group from the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. The group flew into San Jose, Costa Rica and took a lengthy bus ride to Panama City, allowing them to see the countryside of both Central American countries.

The lack of sleep, at least in the initial stages, allowed for suffering necessary for a pilgrimage. This was the first WYD experience for most of the travelers. The group also visited the Old City of Panama and watched ships enter through the Panama Canal.

World Youth Day was instituted by St. Pope John Paul II in 1985. Previous locations included Poland, Germany, Australia, Spain, and the United States. Millions of youth from around the world attend. The largest World Youth Day was at the final Mass in the Manila, Philippines in 1995 with close to five million in attendance, according to Catholic News Agency.

Pilgrims were crowded into festival seating at Santa Maria la Antigua Field, near the Old City of Panama, for most of the engagements, sitting very close to other people. The weather conditions in

Panama during January are hot and humid, reaching 90 degrees Fahrenheit most days. During the festivities, pilgrims have an opportunity to trade country specific items with others, often hat pins, holy cards, and currency. This gives the youth a chance to experience the global aspect of the Catholic Church.

"I felt this sense of belonging by people who had the same faith as me," said Adan Gutierrez from St. Alphonsus Parish.

They received an up-close view of Pope Francis, just before and after his opening remarks, as he traveled from Santa Maria la Antigua Field, in the famous popemobile. Pilgrims from the Dodge City and Oklahoma City dioceses stood near the barricades on the road to catch a glimpse of the Vicar of Christ as he passed through throngs of screaming, adoring fans—a very moving experience.

"When I saw [Pope Francis] up close, everything got brighter," said Gabe Salas of St. Alphonsus Parish, "I felt a spiritual connection."

On one of the days, the group attended an English-speaking catechesis with notable speakers like Curtis Martin, the founder of FOCUS, and Bishop Robert Barron of Los Angeles. The event allowed for Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament with praise and worship music.

Both Salas and Gutierrez said they experienced the presence of Jesus during the event. Pope Francis also offered adoration for the youth during a Vigil on Jan. 26 at St. John Paul II Field.

Pope Francis closed WYD with a Mass, exhorting the young people to "Let us allow the Lord to make us fall in love and let him take us into the future." For priests, it is a special honor to attend the WYD celebrations, especially during Mass.

"I felt like a father!" exclaimed Father

"I remember thinking that the amount for this trip was nearly impossible, and my prayer became, 'God, if you want us to go, you have to make it happen.' Well, He did!"

— Father Jacob Schneider

Schneider. "I care very much about all of the kids who went. It quickly dawned on me that my role was much more than just helping to lead them through a crowd, but it was also to help them navigate their spiritual lives as well.

"It was great to be one of the many priests there with each of our respective groups of youth. Also, concelebrating Mass with the Holy Father was something special. We as priests pray for the pope at every Mass, but when he is standing right there, it takes on a different meaning."

The theme for WYD was from Luke's Gospel showing Mary's fiat with the words "I am the servant of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." After this pilgrimage, the kids had the chance to say "Yes" like Mary did to the Lord.

Now they must take the graces and go forward in the world.