

Please, sir, can I give some more...?

Ruth Morris

World Youth Day 2008 attracted hundreds of thousands of young adults to Sydney to celebrate their faith in the presence of Pope Benedict XVI. Ruth Morris recalls how the MAGiS programme of Ignatian spirituality in the fortnight preceding the celebrations prepared her and other pilgrims for an unforgettable experience.

MAGiS and World Youth Day 2008 – Melbourne and Sydney, Australia

After three amazingly intense weeks in Australia, I am not too sure where to begin telling my story, and yes, this is where most people would say, why not start at the beginning? The problem with that is: how do I know where that was?! Was it when the idea of going all the way across the world to be among fellow young Christians was first proposed? Or when I arrived at Heathrow on 4th July? Or how about when I arrived at Xavier school in Melbourne, very jetlagged and extremely unprepared for the five hour drive out to Portland, Victoria, which was where I was to spend the first week of my MAGiS experience? Well perhaps I'll go from here, Portland – on 6th July, after almost 48 hours of travelling, I had arrived, and I don't think I have ever been happier to see a nun with a pot of hot soup! The nun in question was the ever-ready Sr Denise who I have come to deeply admire. This for us was the start of a beautiful friendship; Sr Denise looked after us as if we were her family, and after a week together I can confidently say that is certainly what we had become!

Take a group of Australians from Melbourne and Sydney, a group of Pakistanis, and a group from the UK and you get Victoria 10, our experiment group. This was and still is, in a sense, who we are. We were there to give and in a way to receive "more", to experience the MAGiS, the Ignatian fortnight before the official World Youth Day celebrations. At this point I still wasn't sure what to expect from this week, the first stage of our pilgrimage. I knew I would be plant-



ing trees, but I could have never have guessed how much I would learn and come to love those I was working with.

'Om Shiva Namha' – I acknowledge the goodness in you and I acknowledge the goodness in myself and in all those around me.

The Gundjitmara people are the indigenous people of the area where we were lived and worked with a group based at the Winda Mara community centre, in Hayward, just to the north of Portland. The Gundjitmara, and indeed all of the indigenous people of Australia, have an immense respect for the land and what it is capable of, and an amazing humility in front of nature. They opened my eyes to really knowing and experiencing how valuable, precious and indeed important the world is for us as humans, and how connected we are to it. We worked with a land management team, made up of five men; two Matthews, Roger, Danny and Plugger, four of whom were part of the Gundjitmara tribe. We planted trees for a week, but this is their job day to day, looking after the earth, and repairing the damage that others have left behind them. Working here, and learning about the strength and fragility of new life, was definitely a spiritually refreshing experience. Growing up and living in a city like London, and then going to this place in the country, a good few hours outside of Melbourne, makes you realise how much you take for granted. We learnt how to plant a tree properly, and about the importance of what kind of tree should be planted in a particular place and why. We were given the opportunity to visit the seed bank and nursery that the Winda Mara use, and see the intricate detail and care that goes into giving the trees the start they

need to be able to survive. One of the highlights of the first week was visiting the remains of the place where some of the first missionaries settled and built their church, and a small village around it. Listening to Roger, one of the land management team, speak about the history of the missions and the different memories, both good and bad, his family have of that place was truly inspiring. There was no anger, no blame or finger-pointing, just a kind of stillness and definite feeling of loss. Roger pointed out that not all of the people that lived here had bad memories of the mission, and even after they were not forced to live there, many of them would return on Sundays to go to Mass. The most significant loss for him was the loss of their language. The inability to communicate the way their ancestors did inevitably takes with it a part of their cultural identity, and is one of the things that cannot just be restored or given back.

“To live MAGiS means to try to know myself and to be aware of my own inner movements.” (The MAGiS08 Journal)

Every day there were five elements that were constant: Morning Prayer, Liturgy, the activity of the day, MAGiS circles and finally the Examen. Each day had a different theme and a different starting point taken from the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola, which provided us with a focus for our thoughts and the ability to be more open to the scripture of that day. Reflection was extremely important, and in a way what we spent the most time doing throughout the MAGiS experience. We were provided with MAGiS journals, where we could write about our experiences, and which also contained the five elements of each day.

The MAGiS circle was a new experience for me, and one that was carried forward into the second phase of our journey: the Ignatian gathering at St Ignatius Riverview in Sydney, in preparation for the main World Youth Day events. Being able to share my thoughts, feelings and experiences in a safe space among friends was something I have never really experienced, and have come to really appreciate. It has helped me find new ways of being open to God’s will, of letting things go, being refreshed and starting anew. Our MAGiS circles were always towards the end of the day, which meant we were able to gather all of the events of the day and share what it had meant to us,

keeping things and letting things go, leaving us prepared for the Examen before starting a new day.

Openness is an invitation to those we are open with. Just like God’s open arms are waiting, our hearts should be ready, open and waiting.

We were constantly on the move, so to be able to take the familiar with us meant a lot. The Ignatian gathering in Sydney started from a place we were all familiar with, but in an unfamiliar setting among unfamiliar people. It felt like the next step towards taking what I have to share out into the world. The MAGiS circles took on a different meaning, as it would be a time where we could come back together as a group but from different experiences with very different things to share. At Riverview, we were provided with so many opportunities, and were made to feel so welcome by everyone. We were able to go to reconciliation and experience catechesis, and receive the Eucharist every day. There was a procession with the World Youth Day cross, before the opening Mass of the Ignatian gathering, where we were welcomed by the aboriginal people of the area, who also interpreted the scripture of the day through dance. The next few days were spent mostly reflecting on where we had come from in the first week, in preparation for where we were going: out into the wider church, joining up with the hundreds of thousands of other pilgrims to celebrate our differences but most of all to celebrate our similarities in Christ.

Up until this point I had had such an intense experience that I wasn’t sure what else I could possibly take in, but as the bus weaved through the streets towards St Patrick’s Manly for our penultimate gathering as a MAGiS group, there was an overwhelming sense of excitement, of moving forwards and growth. We were moving on, one more step towards the world with our own unique gifts. We ate and sang in the sun, shared memories and jokes until we had to move on once more, towards the opening Mass at Barangaroo, the beginning of the World Youth Day celebrations and the final part of our pilgrimage. This was the first time we experienced the overwhelming voice of 400,000 young Christians and it was an absolutely amazing experience that set us on our way for the last part of our Australian journey. From this day forward the streets of Sydney were

filled with singing, dancing and laughter. It was one of those moments when you find yourself smiling, and you realise that you're not really sure why you're smiling but you know it's the right thing to do. The moment that I would say had one of the largest impacts on me throughout my time in Australia was experiencing the Stations of the Cross. That was an experience that anyone who was there will carry with them for the rest of their life. It was a portrayal of the pilgrimage Jesus made, played out through the streets of Sydney by actors and dancers in an incredibly moving and real way. It was such an intensely spiritual and prayerful experience, it connected all the pilgrims even though it was on such a large scale. I think it was the perfect preparation for the final Mass and our own journey to Randwick Racecourse, where we would spend the night and have Mass with the Pope before we all returned home.

Before we got that far though we had our final gathering as an Ignatian group. As we all packed into St Canice's Church in Elizabeth Bay, some sat in the aisles while others stood at the back, but we were all grateful for what we had been given and shared. It was actually quite sad, as we knew we wouldn't be seeing most of our fellow MAGiS pilgrims again – apart from on Facebook of course! We celebrated Mass, and to end on a high note to set us on our journeys, it was announced that there would be a MAGiS 2009 which would take place in East Africa,

in Tanzania and Kenya. This was great news and maybe we shall see each other again after all. With that we began the walk over Sydney Harbour Bridge and towards Randwick Racecourse.

It's all part of the experience!

The atmosphere was even bigger and better than it had been at the opening Mass and the welcoming of the Pope combined. The sound of 400,000 young people waiting to hear what His Holiness had to say to send them out into the world was intense. We found a spot amongst the crowds and settled down, a lot of us slept after the long journey, until evening Mass began followed by the vigil – or should I say all night celebrations and party! It was amazing! I must say I didn't last all night and at some point curled up in my sleeping bag as I tried to shut out the cold. In the morning there was that definite morning-after smell, but with a hint of nostalgia as it was the last day of our celebrations. The Popemobile drove past as I clambered out of my sleeping bag. His words of hope and guidance, the sense of joy in his voice and his whole demeanour washed over all of us sending us out with a smile on our faces and laughter in our hearts, and we knew exactly why!

Ruth Morris is Producer of Pray-as-you-go and Film Reviews Editor of Thinking Faith.