**Welcome Home to Ordinary Times**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

This past month, I have read with interest many accounts of World Youth Day and the experiences shared by my younger sisters and brothers in Christ as hundreds of thousands of them experienced their pilgrimage to Portugal. Although I am an avid letter writer, I cannot write hundreds of thousands of letters to welcome each young pilgrim home. But, if I could, this is what I would write –

*Welcome home!* I hope that you have returned with hearts full of gratitude to God who led you through your pilgrimage and those whose generosity in time, treasure, talent and prayer made it possible for you to join the Holy Father and your fellow pilgrims for the time you spent together.

You may hear it said that you, the young, are the future of the Church. I challenge that and say, instead, that you – and I, and our elders, and the very young, all together – are the present of the Church. Now that you are back, do not wait until tomorrow to be “the future.” Rather, wholeheartedly serve the Church in your present circumstances today.

Return to your parishes with love, enthusiasm, and a heart to serve. Your bags may be filled with memorabilia and gifts you are bringing home to loved ones. But, also bring back a heart filled with the desire to share all that you have experienced. You have seen the richness of the global Catholic family. But we need your generosity in building up your local parish family as well.

Remember what experiences in Lisbon touched your heart and soul and write them down. Maybe it was the words of a talk or a homily. Maybe it was the peace after celebrating Reconciliation or the awe of receiving the Eucharist. Maybe it was the witness of a fellow pilgrim or a song or a moment of blessed silence. Whatever they were, hold them in your heart, treasure them, and let your heart return to them on days you feel discouraged.

Have an honest conversation with yourself and ask whether your heart or conscience felt moved in particular ways while you were in prayer abroad. Were you being called to end a grudge? Face a fear? Accept a challenge? Listen to a quiet call to a particular vocation in life? If that is true, do not silence that whisper in your heart. Listen to it deeply and daringly.

Stay in touch with those you met along the way. It is easy to promise connections will hold – until life, so often, gets in the way. If you sowed the seeds of friendship in the crowds, give those seeds time and attention so that, if meant to be, they will endure.

Do not be afraid to share your faith with others. The world needs joyful witnesses who, in the words of scripture, are “ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.” (1 Peter 3:15). Many people today – but particularly those of your generations – lack hope or a vision of the good, the beautiful and the true. In a world with woe without God at its center, too many find themselves feeling adrift and unmoored from that which matters most. Bring your joyful witness – and be ready, without fear, to proclaim that your hope comes from God.

While World Youth Day may be a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage for you, understand and appreciate the importance of pilgrimage in your life. Remember the importance of withdrawing from everyday life, on occasion, to be refilled and re-created. Schedule time to do so and make it a priority in your busy lives. It can be something as simple as a quiet afternoon spent in a local church or a day’s drive to a holy place alone or with others.

Remember and appreciate the importance of companionship on the journey of faith. It may be a while before you find yourself again in a crowd of hundreds of thousands for Mass or worship. Yet, do all that you can to gather, grow and nourish a small community of faith. Whether it is a campus ministry group, a parish youth group, or a group of Catholic young adults, or rookie parents or newlyweds, or simply a group of devoted friends and neighbors, find a group who will support you and who you will support as you grow in faith.

Invite your peers to learn more about the Catholic faith. So many people who join or return to the Church say that the initial prompting was an invitation from someone they knew. As the fall begins, many parishes invite inquiries from those considering the Catholic faith. A personal invitation from you will have more impact than words written in a bulletin or posted on a parish website.

Above all else, keep Christ at the center of your lives. World Youth Day had many happy distractions. There was the excitement of overseas travel, the sightseeing in Portugal, the joyful camaraderie of others, the meetings with the Holy Father, the sense of being part of history, and the “high” of the emotions you likely felt. Now that you are back, appreciate all of those things. Yet do not allow them to distract you from the primary reason for it all: Christ Himself.

Christ called you to live in this time and in your particular corner of the world. Grow in your love of Him, share that love with others in your words and in your deeds – and welcome home to ordinary times!

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