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## 'There are two types of faith': exploring young Portuguese people's participation in world youth day

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### ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the significance of young Portuguese people's experiences of participating in a global Catholic event, the World Youth Day, by discussing their motivations and learning opportunities. World Youth Day is seen as a major experience full of many small experiences that become part of the lifelong process of socialisation. These may include non-formal and informal educational experiences. The literature has pointed to the religious/spiritual significance of the event, but other aspects have yet to be studied. The present study used a mixed-methods methodology that included a questionnaire ( $N = 1,351$ ) and 20 semi-structured interviews, to Portuguese young people participating in the event. The results showed that the religious/spiritual dimension was important as motivations and effects, but cultural and social aspects were also very relevant. Membership of a Catholic youth group was crucial in the decision to participate and to the process of learning to live with others. The Pope appeared as a central figure in the event, and the way he communicated with participants enhanced their sense of belonging to the Catholic Church.

### KEYWORDS

Experiences; informal education; non-formal education; participation; youth; World Youth Day

## Introduction

Young people's social engagement and political participation have been central to youth policies and research agendas and are understood to be essential to the promotion of societal cohesion and citizenship (European Union 2018; Rodrigues, Menezes, and Ferreira 2015). Social engagement is associated with culture, sport, religion, the environment, solidarity, and unions of different kinds. According to Ferreira (2016), 11.8% of Portuguese young people were involved in religious groups. 'Portugal is the most religiously observant country in Western Europe, with more than a third of Portuguese adults (37%) showing high levels of religious commitment' (AAVV 2018, 95). Living in an era of secularisation, where religion as an organising narrative does not seem to be significant, it is interesting to understand why thousands of Portuguese young people spend part of their holidays at the international and profoundly religious gathering that is World Youth Day (WYD). The event was initiated by Pope John Paul II in 1985. It takes

place annually in Catholic dioceses and parishes around the world. In addition, the Pope stages an international meeting in a different city for young people every 2–3 years. The 31st WYD was held in Krakow, Poland; 3.5 million pilgrims participated (Agenzia Info Salesiana n.d.).

The present study aimed to answer the following question: how do Portuguese young people involved in this international event give meaning, appropriate, and integrate in their life the intensive participation in WYD? It is argued herein that these experiences, inserted in the lifelong process of socialisation, may become educational, being possible to interrogate this context as a context of non-formal and informal education (Coombs and Ahmed 1974). Non-formal education, since that for Catholic Church the global programme of a WYD is a kind of large catechesis (John Paul 1996), presenting the journey of conversion to Christ, with a large set of experiences that aim to generate profound questioning in the participants and a stronger commitment with Catholic Church. The informal education took the form of a broad range of experiences in terms of travel, human relationships, contact with new cultures, and so on, that happened besides the official programme.

The WYD, in this study, is understood in the context of the transformations taking place in contemporary society. It then discusses participation, socialisation, the respondents' learning experiences, and informal and non-formal education. The results section offers a more detailed perspective on the educational outcomes of participation in WYD.

## World Youth Day

World Youth Day is the largest young people's event, both in terms of its duration and its global reach; it takes place over 1 week and attracts visitors from every region in the world. The official recommended age group is 14 to 30 years. The timetable is approximately the same each year (Table 1).

Some of the events are central, which means that they include all participants (opening Mass, papal welcome, way of the Cross, Vigil and final Mass). We emphasise the Vigil and Final Mass, as the most important moments of the WYD. The vigil consists of a night of prayer, beginning with the presence of the Pope and his address to young people, containing moments of music, testimonies, and dancing. In the following morning the Pope celebrates a mass to send young people to their countries to be witnesses of their lived experience. The catechesis took place in different places in the city of Krakow and surroundings, being organised by country or by language and given by the bishops of each country/language, depending on the way the countries are organised. During

**Table 1.** World Youth Day: Schedule.

	Monday 25/07	Tuesday 26/07	Wednesday 27/07	Thursday 28/06	Friday 29/07	Saturday 30/06	Sunday 31/07
Morning	Arrival		Catechesis of the bishops			Pilgrimage to the vigil site	Final Mass
Afternoon		Vocations Centre Youth festival					Volunteers meet with the Holy Father
Evening		Opening Mass	Youth festival	Papal welcome	Way of the Cross	Vigil with the Holy Father	

Source: Krakow WYD (2016) (adapted).

catechesis, there is usually a time of sharing in groups and the daily Eucharist, presided over by the bishop. The youth festival consists of a religious, artistic, and cultural programme with around 1,000 different activities involving various communities, congregations, religious movements, and youth groups from different countries. The youth festival is almost the only space open to a more active participation of young people. During the several months of preparation, the young people, individually, in small or large groups, can propose different activities that, after approval, integrate the programme. In addition to the events referred to above, there are other parallel activities, which are organised by diocese/country/religious movement; these may include meetings with pilgrims from the same country or religious movement, visits to religious or cultural sites (e.g. the concentration camps at Auschwitz or Birkenau and the Jasna Góra monastery), and visits to museums, parks and other places in the host city or in cities nearby. Before the main week-long event, young people are also invited to spend a week in other dioceses in the host country to meet with different communities, pray, and volunteer.

The different activities at WYD ‘constitute in their globality a form of vast catechesis, an announcement of the path of conversion to Christ, based on the experience and deep questions of the daily life of the participants’ (John Paul 1996). In other words, the main goal of WYD is to teach the participants about their faith, to strengthen it, and to share it with people from around the world (Rymarz 2007; Singleton 2011). Through WYD, the Roman Catholic Church addresses contemporary problems such as pluralisation, secularisation, and the privatisation of religion (Halter 2013; Norman and Johnson 2011).

### **Socialisation, learning opportunities, and participation**

Studies have shown that the lived experience of those who attend WYD have a significant impact on their religious beliefs and practice, especially amongst those who have previously participated in religious events (Mariz, Amelia Belquior Mesquita, and de Araújo 2018; Mason 2010; Rymarz 2008; Singleton 2011). However, the effects of WYD are not restricted to the spiritual dimension; the size and global nature of the event, the presence of like-minded friends, and the range of activities all have been noted to have an impact. Participation in WYD should be understood in the context of a broader lifelong process of socialisation (Abrantes 2011; Josso 2002). Extraordinary moments in life, such as participation in WYD, are experienced in different and more or less meaningful ways and can transform the way people act and/or think (Silberman 2007). Learning at WYD takes place through both non-formal and informal education (Coombs and Ahmed 1974). Non-formal education tends to be associated with the central events, the vocations centre, daily Masses, and the catechesis. Informal education is related to other experiences, such as watching performances and meeting people from around the globe. The multiplicity of experiences and relationships offer numerous learning opportunities, being important to understand how participants use them to develop personal and social skills (Charlot 2000; Snell 2009). Research has shown that the quality of non-formal and informal education is often associated with participation ‘in the conception, in the elaboration, in the realization, and, as it is evident, in the assessment and in the reorientation of the different activities’ (Berger 2004, 18). Participants at WYD have little say in its organisation. The event is largely conceived, elaborated, realised, and evaluated by adults (and in particular by those who are part of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church,

such as priests and nuns). The young people are regarded by the organisers as recipients and objects rather than subjects, and this is reflected in their experiences, the relationships they establish, and ultimately their learning opportunities.

## Methodology

The present study was part of a larger research project on participation in Catholic youth groups, learning processes, and youth cultures. A mixed-methods approach was adopted; the data were collected through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews following the parallel model (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2009). This made possible a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the participation of Portuguese young people in (WYD Krakow 2016).

### The questionnaire

Around 7,000 Portuguese participated in WYD 2016 in Krakow, but the *Lusofesta* was attended by only 2,500 (Ecclesia 2016). The *Lusofesta*, taking advantage of the presence of a large number of Portuguese Young people in the WYD, consists in a meeting (that happens during the WYD, in one of the afternoons) organised by the National Portuguese Department of Youth Ministry, an organisational structure dependent on the National Bishops Conference, to bring together Portuguese youth with their bishops. Not all Portuguese young people participated in *Lusofesta*, there were two reasons for this: (a) attendees had to be registered with a National Bishops Conference group and bring the Portuguese kit; and (b) for security reasons, the capacity of the room was limited to 2,500 (which created several problems because more than 2,500 kits had been sold). The questionnaire was distributed in paper form, in Portuguese language, by volunteers to participants at *Lusofesta*. Given that the questionnaire was distributed in this meeting, only Portuguese young people answered. The sample was casual, non-probabilistic, and non-random since the study was exploratory and the respondents were in the same place at the same time. They answered the questionnaire voluntarily (Marôco 2014).

The questionnaire comprised three sections: demographic data; motivation and important moments; and perceived learning outcomes. All the questions were closed-ended, except the last one, which asked for comments on the survey. They were answered using a 4-point scale (1 = *nothing*; 2 = *a little*; 3 = *much*; and 4 = *very much*) (a neutral mid-point was deliberately omitted). A total of 1,351 questionnaires, were collected at the meeting; a description of the sample is presented in Table 2. Descriptive statistical analysis was performed using SPSS (IBM, Version 25).

### Semi-structured interviews

Twenty respondents from seven different dioceses were interviewed in Portuguese (nine females and 11 males; 16–44 years of age). The script included questions such as (a) ‘What have been the most important aspects of your participation in WYD so far?; (b) ‘Do you think you have learnt anything from participating?; (c) ‘What did you learn?; and (d) ‘What does it mean to be young and Catholic today for you

**Table 2.** Description of the sample.

Item	Results
Gender	38.4% male; 59.9% female
Age	41.2%: 15–18
	37.9%: 19–24
	10.1%: 25–30
	10.3%: 31 and above
Occupation	69.2%: students
	22.8%: worker-students
	0.3%: workers

**Table 3.** Description of the categories.

Category	Description
Beliefs and spirituality	Aspects related to the personal relationship with Jesus. Coincidences in everyday life attributable to the dimension of faith. Greater commitment and possible changes after WYD. Listening attentively and in person to the words of the Pope, which were reflected and reproduced.
Cultural aspects	Aspects relating to the respondents' reception in Poland and Polish culture (including the religious dimension).
Living with others	Narratives about personal transformation that involved living together with other young people and especially with peers from their church group. Issues pertaining to encounters with other cultures.
Indicators of sense of belonging	Aspects related to the way the Catholic Church <i>talks</i> with young people during WYD. Direct contact with the figure of the Pope. A sense of peace, harmony, and communion. Validation of faith by the number of young people present.

personally?' Two main themes emerged from the subsequent content analysis: (a) learnings and learning processes; and (b) conceptions of youth. In this paper we will discuss the data from the first category, in which the respondents referred to their most significant experiences, what they felt they had learnt, and how they thought their lives would be different after the event. 4 subcategories emerge from the answers and are presented in [Table 3](#).

Participation in this research project was voluntary and all participants were informed about the nature of the study. Informed consent was asked, and the research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards.

## Results and discussion: the educational dimensions of WYD

Although the target group for WYD is, according to the Catholic Church's official statements, young people from the ages 14 to 30 years old, who may or may not have a religious affiliation, the event is directed principally at young people with a Catholic background – in particular, those who are members of church-based youth groups (Pfadenhauer 2010). This is very important in terms of socialisation; previous experiences, interpersonal relationships, an understanding of the faith, language, and so on not only influences involvement in the event itself but may also have a profound influence on the participants' posterior engagement with their youth groups and the church.

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics on the motivation to participate.

Motivation	Little or nothing (%age)	Much or very much (age%)
I believe it is an opportunity for personal growth	3.3	96.7
To meet with Jesus Christ	3.7	96.3
An encounter with Pope Francis appeals to me	3.8	96.2
The thrill of participating in a great youth gathering	4	96
I would like to nurture/deepen my faith	6	94
I wanted to experience something new	10.3	89.7
An opportunity to meet new people	12.6	87.4
Discover the meaning of my life	20.8	79.2
Getting to know Poland/Krakow	22.9	77.1
The experience of travelling with friends	26.9	73.1
People in my school/parish/movement encouraged me	27.6	72.4
My friends were coming	30.8	69.2
The opportunity to travel outside Portugal	35.0	65
I was convinced by the testimony of people who had participated in WYD previously	39.8	60.2
Have a different vacation	47.8	52.2
I learnt about it online (Facebook, website, and so on) and it appealed to me	52.7	47.3
I participated in a previous WYD, and I wanted to repeat the experience	66.7	33.3

### ***Motivation to participate***

To understand what motivates young people to attend WYD, the questionnaire offered 17 options; the results are presented in Table 4. (The options little or nothing and much or very much are combined for ease of reading).

The results show that Portuguese young people have mixed motivations to participate in the event, given that religious, cultural, and social aspects have high rates of agreement. Nonetheless, and focusing on the 5 first items (all with more than 90% of agreement), 4 of them could be interpreted, as related to the religious/spiritual dimension: the possibility of personal growth; meeting with Jesus Christ; the nurturing and deepening of one's faith; and being in the presence of Pope Francis. In the context of this research and considering of the spiritual intention of the event, acknowledged by the participants, the personal growth was associated to the religious motivations. The thrill of participating in a great youth gathering was the fifth most rated motivation, which pointed to WYD's importance as a social event. Other social aspects did not seem to be as central as the religious aspects, but they had some currency.

The items related to tourism and travelling, such as 'Getting to know Poland/ Krakow'; 'The opportunity to travel outside Portugal'; and 'Have a different vacation' were less important. The option 'I learnt about it online . . . and it appealed to me' was marginally less popular, which seemed paradoxical given the efforts the organisation has made to establish a presence on social media platforms.

To understand further the motivation to participate, it was important to establish the religious practice of the respondents: 85.7% went to mass every Sunday and 52.6% dedicated time to prayer on a daily basis. In addition, 92% went to WYD with their Catholic youth group (i.e. from the parish or congregation/youth movement); only one respondent (0.1% of the sample) went on his/her own. This suggest that, although the Catholic Church invites everyone to WYD, it motivates especially

those with Catholic practice and/or those who are members of a Catholic youth group. Participants are searching for a religious experience, but this is intimately connected with the presence of their peers. They would most probably not take part if the event were for Catholics of all ages or if they had to go alone; they want to share their experience with other young people.

Bilska-Wodecka, Sołjan, and Liro's (2017) study of WYD 2016 in Krakow showed that the decision to participate was primarily religious. Our findings bore this out, nonetheless the decision process is more complex, since the majority of participants go to the WYD with young people from their catholic youth group and considering that 'the registration procedure was not geared towards individuals, but rather towards groups formed almost exclusively in a parish context – if they did not come from existing groups structure' (Pfadenhauer 2010, 387). Rymarz (2007) argued that 'a relatively high rate of affiliation does not necessarily indicate a strong experience of peer support'; nonetheless, our data suggested that the group experience was crucial in the decision to attend WYD.

### ***WYD experiences and meanings***

The motivations to participate can be viewed also as expectations for the event and are linked with the experiences most valued and with meanings attributed to participation and learning processes. For the present study, the wide range of experiences and activities at WYD were categorised into nine most relevant moments. The results are presented in Table 5.

The results show that, generally, the participants adhered very closely to almost all the activities of the event, but some were valued more than others. The latter were those at which the Pope was present; the Vigil with the Pope and the final Mass were at the top of the list. The less valued moments were the conferences/catechesis and the possibility of confession. Respondents were also asked how they expected to change as a consequence of their participation in WYD. The results are presented in Table 6.

These results show that, during the event, the majority of respondents perceived their participation as one of change and personal transformation. They believed they would change in almost every respect much or very much, but the items related to religious aspects, (the first two), seemed to be more relevant to a greater number. This accords with religious motivations.

**Table 5.** Moments most valued by respondents.

WYD moments	Little or nothing (%age)	Much or very much (%age)
Vigil with the Pope and final Mass	1.6	98.4
Welcome to the Pope	2.3	97.7
Moments to share faith with other young people	5.6	94.5
Moments of personal prayer	8.5	91.5
Getting to know Krakow	9.8	90.2
Opening Mass	9.9	90.1
Youth festival	15.4	84.5
Conferences, catechesis, and learning more about the faith	16.3	83.7
Possibility of confession	24.4	78.2



**Table 6.** Perceptions of the effects of World Youth Day.

The effects of participation	Little or nothing (%age)	Much or very much (%age)
My faith and my life will go together, I will live more in accordance with what I believe	3.6	96.4
I will have a more intimate relationship with God/Jesus	4.2	95.8
I will have matured and become a better person	6.9	93.1
I will have more ability to understand others	7.6	92.4
I will be more sensitive to the different realities of the world	7.7	92.3
I will have a stronger Catholic identity	8.9	91.1
My life will have more coherence	11.1	88.9
I will know more about the Catholic faith	10.1	88.2
I have acquired skills that I will mobilise in other contexts	12.9	87.1
I will have more ability to relate to others	13.4	86.6
I will learn more about the culture and traditions of other countries	13.5	86.5
My commitment to social justice will increase	16.3	83.7
I will participate more actively in my parish/movement	16.8	83.2
I will have more personal freedom to travel and engage in other activities	19.9	80.1
It will be easier to communicate with people of other languages	20.2	79.8

The interviews helped us to understand how young people perceived WYD and the effects of their participation. We have categorised the data under four headings; it should, however, be noted that these are interconnected and mutually influencing.

### ***The cultural dimension***

The cultural dimension related to how youngsters were aware of Polish culture in terms of the welcome received; the food; Polish religiosity; tourist sites; the language; and meeting young people from another place: ‘In 1st place, the welcome that Poland is giving us, is being very good’ (JM03, 23, male); ‘Poland is a country that gives a lot of importance to spirituality, with all the suffering that this country lived through ... as you can see, due to the number of Polish saints, great strength to the Church’ (JM01, 34, female); ‘We saw in two days, what human beings are capable of doing for both evil and good. Auschwitz and the next day we went to Wieliczka, those salt mines, a great work that a human being does, isn’t it?’ (JM10, 36, male); and ‘hmm ... a very significant thing ... it may be stupid to say this [smiles], but speaking English’ (JM11, 22, female).

### ***Living with others: the social dimension***

Living with others is a very important aspect of WYD. First, the majority of participants come as part of youth groups, and/or are integrated into larger groups from their own dioceses. This can present a challenge:

I think it was being in a group and learning to deal with all the people, because it is very complicated, in the end we live with people on a day-to-day basis, always, 24 hours over 24 hours, and sometimes tiredness ends become something that bothers us a lot. (JM05, 17, female)

At the same time, their groups represent a safe place where they can be themselves, and this helps them deal with any difficulties: ‘it is the experience that we all have together, there is nothing to bring us down, if someone is bad the other helps, there is nothing to put us down. It is the sharing we have between everyone . . .’ (JM07, 19, female). Second, they have the chance to meet with people from other countries and realities; as one 17-year-old boy noted,

coexistence with everyone, with all realities, because we are just used to be with the same people, to our Portugal and we only see Portuguese or Brazilians . . . here we live with Poles, Australians and we managed to socialize differently. Always talking about Jesus Christ, always talking about our God, our hero, our Saviour. (JM06, 17, male)

Living and learning with other young people both from their youth groups and from around the globe helped the participants establish new relationships or deepened previous ones; promoted personal development; and reinforced their sense of belonging to their youth groups and the church, their spirituality, and belief.

### ***Sense of belonging***

The multiplicity of experiences the participants enjoyed together solidified their sense of belonging, firstly to their group: ‘we already had a great friendship, but everything we live here served to further unite us here in Krakow’ (JM08, 18, male). One group leader said that

my group was relatively small and we joined another group and it was a fantastic relationship because it seems that we have known each other for a long time and the spontaneity as we started to pray, be it the rosary, or something else, have surprised me. (JM15, 23, female)

Secondly, the sense of belonging to the Catholic Church, which was felt through a connection with young people from other countries and a connection with the Pope. Meeting others seemed to validate their faith: ‘to see all these people here, these moments when we are all together and so many countries are together, it is . . . these are very moving moments when we really see everyone’s faith’ (JM04, 15, female). The participants knew that they were not just a minority in their parishes but part of a larger international group. The connection with the Pope was felt by just being physically close to him – ‘the most striking thing was seeing the Pope so close, we managed to get very close, at the side of the road when he passed the Popemobile’ (JM04, 15, female) – and by knowing that the Pope spoke directly for them: ‘it is my 1st WYD with Pope Francis and therefore the strength of Pope Francis, of the very direct speech he has with us’ (JM01, 34, female). Also, he seemed to understand their difficulties: ‘the most significant thing for me was the Holy Father’s homily yesterday because it made us believe in our dreams and many times in our communities they consider these dreams to be impossible’ (JM18, 17, female).

## **Beliefs and spirituality**

The connection with the Pope, and the sense of belonging that it created, was intimately related to spirituality and beliefs. A more emotional relationship with the Pope cultivated an openness to a deeper engagement with spirituality and the Catholic faith, and consequently a commitment to the church. The relationship Pope Francis established with the participants allowed them to hear his words and try to put them in practice: ‘we always hear that God’s mercy is infinite, but we don’t always have the notion of it. And WYD is important to also live it . . . to live the way Jesus wants us to do’ (JMJ02, 24, male). Another aspect of spirituality and beliefs was the way the participants interpreted coincidences in their daily experiences while they were in Krakow: ‘it is Jesus who brings us here for some reason and makes us enjoy all aspects, both cultural and friendships with other people’ (JMJ11, 22, female). World Youth Day also made it possible for them to question and think about faith and draw some conclusions:

There are two types of faith. One that is lived in sprint, that is the one that we live in WYD, where the feelings, the emotions above all, are on edge and then the one that is at the rhythm of the marathon, that is the one that we have to know to keep the rhythm when we return home, which is mainly to be successful, so as not to fail, so that we can keep ourselves connected to God, even when something goes less well, so that we don’t let ourselves go down and faith doesn’t get lost when that happens. (JMJ15, 16, female)

Interestingly, the above respondent referred to her feelings and emotions, the role they played in the event, and the need to sustain them after she returned home.

## **Conclusions**

We were interested in trying to understand the effects of participation in WYD, the motivation for getting involved, and the meanings attributed to the event. The first aspect that emerged was that it was very much a collective experience; previous participation in a group was a crucial consideration in the decision to go to Krakow. Going with a group of peers with whom they were familiar may have transformed the way the participants would then relate to the Catholic Church and people in general.

World Youth Day offers a wide range of youthful, touristic, mediatised, and culturized experiences (Pfadenhauer 2010; Singleton 2008; Webber 2008). This was born out in our data. Religious motivations and effects are perceived as very relevant, nonetheless, social and cultural aspects also have some relevance. In fact, considering that the youngsters are viewed mainly as receptors of the activity, their speeches show that there are a large amount of significant experiences that happen in the event in all the dimensions referred. Each person experienced WYD in their own way and as part of their personal ongoing socialisation, and the exact nature of their experience was determined in part by how they related it to their lives.

The participants stressed the centrality of the Pope and his capacity to establish a direct dialogue of ‘transparency, sincerity, and integrity’; he appealed to them especially through his message of ‘peace, faith, hope, and love’ (George 2015, 75). His idealism, his commitment to social justice, and his capacity for affection drew the participants closer to him and presented the possibility of them building a more intimate relationship with their youth groups and churches after the event.

The present study has a number of limitations; for instance, the interviews were conducted while the event was taking place, so the experiences the participants described were being lived very deeply and enthusiastically at that point; nevertheless, they offer some context for motivation and meaning. It would be worth carrying out further studies, especially longitudinal ones, that address the impact of participation in WYD on the values, beliefs, and religious practices of other young people.

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