

Archbishop Bathersby



Archbishop John Bathersby of Brisbane led a group of World Youth Day 2011 pilgrims through the Holy Land on the way to Madrid. Journalist PAUL DOBBYN spoke with the archbishop in Spain about his pilgrimage

WHEN Archbishop John Bathersby of Brisbane recently spoke in Madrid of standing on Mount Sinai about a week earlier and seeing the sun rise "through God's holy power" there was a sense of a peak life moment.

The archbishop's words came at the conclusion of his spiritual leadership of a group of more than 50 of Queensland's Catholic youth on Sacred Origins, a 12-day pilgrimage through key sites in the Holy Land.

He was about to start his involvement with World Youth Day celebrations in Madrid.

More remarkable was that this peak experience was but one of many such moments in the archbishop's life, especially in the past few years, as he moves towards retirement.

Archbishop Bathersby's central role in Brisbane archdiocese's sesquicentenary celebrations, his initiative in securing St Mary MacKillop as archdiocesan patron and officiating at celebrations in her honour, the State Government's recent recognition of his leadership of Brisbane archdiocese ... the list went on.

And now he was speaking about climbing Mount Sinai.

Earlier one of the female pilgrims on Sacred Origins had told me the archbishop's leadership was "inspirational".
"There's no way I would have climbed Mount Sinai without him," she said.

"I thought: If he can do it at his age, then I most certainly can."

The archbishop chuckled at this revelation.
He was even more amused when asked how many more times he might climb Mount Sinai and how many more World Youth Days he might attend.

"I was able to tell the pilgrims I'd last climbed Mount Sinai when I was a sprightly 64-year-old," he said.

"That was on my way to World Youth Day in Rome in 2000.
"However, I don't think I'll climb Sinai ever again ... there's such a lot of pain associated with this."

The revelation made what followed more poignant.

"There were absolutely hundreds of people on the top of Mount Sinai and we waited there for that orange-coloured sun to appear above the horizon," he said.

"It touched us very deeply when through God's holy power the sun rose - it was almost impossible not to have tears in our eyes on the mountain where the 10 commandments were given to Moses.

"That gift from God Himself started a new world in the Old Testament, and that new world is still there."

Of amusement to the group was that its Muslim guide kept referring to Archbishop Bathersby as "his bishop".

"The Muslim guide was checking to see how I was travelling on the climb up Mount Sinai. He kept asking: 'Where is my bishop?'" Archbishop Bathersby said.

"And the people in the group would say, 'But he's our bishop'."
The group's celebration of the Mass beside the tomb of Jesus in Jerusalem was one of the high points of the Sacred Origins pilgrimage, the archbishop said.

"We were able to celebrate that in a closed room together.

"It was something that touched our hearts very deeply because in the Mass we were also celebrating the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

"And it was just amazing to realise when we celebrate the Mass we're meeting Jesus heart to heart.

"We all became very conscious of how important celebrating the Eucharist is because it's a re-presentation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus."

The celebration of Mass on a boat on the Sea of Galilee was another peak moment.

"The engines were stopped and we celebrated Mass in the quiet, realising Jesus had also sailed on the sea perhaps on numerous occasions," Archbishop Bathurst said.

"In the Garden of Gethsemane there was an awareness of Jesus' suffering there as he sought the will of the Father.

"It kept coming back to Him that the will of the Father was suffering and death ... we were conscious we were in that same area where Jesus had suffered so deeply.

"At the same time we understood He had suffered and died that we might all have new lives in a new world.

"It was just marvellous to realise this all happened about 2000 years ago in this area."

So is there anything new that has been learnt by this latest experience?

"Well," the archbishop said, "it's just the goodness of people generally, particularly the young people ... it was marvellous to be with them.

"I also realise that each and every time I come together with such a group I learn so much from them, because there's goodness in every person.

"Jesus acknowledged the enormous importance of each and every person and their place in God's family.

"It's been a very great privilege for me to be able to come with these young people and hear what they have to say.

"And I suppose in their way they're learning things from me as well.

"Please God some of the things I have said may have touched their hearts and minds and that will stay with them until the end of their lives."

And what did the archbishop make of World Youth Day in Madrid thus far?

"It's marvellous here too ... instead of having just 50 or so young people we come here and find thousands of young people," he said.

"We also go to huge gatherings where young people listen to different bishops, archbishops and cardinals speaking about the Gospel and in a special way speaking about the evangelisation needed in the Church and the world at the present time.

"Certainly it's been wonderfully organised to enable young people to hear these Church leaders speaking out of their heart about what their faith means to them.

"And there's the music too ... the young people dance like devils around the hall.

"But they do also knuckle down and listen to what the speakers have to say ... I think it does an enormous amount of good."

Finally, perhaps inevitably, the conversation turned to Archbishop Bathurst's thoughts on his own future.

"Well, it's very much in the hands of the Pope," he said.

"I have handed in my resignation as required on reaching the age of 75.

"It's been a wonderful blessing from God to have been a priest, bishop and finally archbishop.

"Whatever the future holds, the important thing is to be living in faith."

Source:

The Catholic Leader, 11th September

2011 http://www.catholicleader.com.au/news.php/features/speaking-from-the-heart-about-faith_76176