

Panama ready to open its doors to thousands attending World Youth Day

As World Youth Day in Panama draws near, organizers said they are prepared to make young people from around the globe feel right at home.

While warm temperatures will greet thousands of young people in Panama, Father Romero Aguilar, WYD general coordinator, told Catholic News Service he hopes that the warmth of hospitality also will make them feel welcome.

“People are opening their homes to house young people. We were surprised by how the people responded to the appeal for housing. We want all the kids to have a place, a space, a home,” Father Aguilar said.

Father Aguilar, along with Archbishop Jose Domingo Ulloa of Panama, Danubia Allard, the Panamanian foreign ministry’s liaison for WYD, and Miroslava Rosas, Panama’s ambassador to the Holy See, were among the dignitaries and church officials briefing journalists on the upcoming event and their preparations to welcome Pope Francis and the myriad of young men and women expected to attend.

The pope’s visit to Panama Jan. 23-27 will be his 26th trip outside of Italy and his third World Youth Day. The theme for World Youth Day 2019 is taken from the Gospel of St. Luke: “I am the servant of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.”

During his visit, the pope will celebrate a penitential liturgy Jan. 25 with young inmates at Las Garzas de Pacora Juvenile Detention Centre in Pacora. He will also visit Casa Hogar el Buen Samaritano (Good Samaritan Home), a centre dedicated to helping people with HIV-AIDS.

The pope’s meetings with young people who are unable to take part in the public WYD activities is a response to the Gospel’s call to clothe the naked, visit the sick and comfort the imprisoned, the WYD organizing committee said in a Nov. 20 statement.

Although fewer young people will attend the Panama event compared to past World Youth Days, local church and government officials were optimistic and said they expect some 200,000 young people to attend.

Archbishop Ulloa told journalists that more than 47,000 young pilgrims from 155 countries had registered for the event, while 168,000 others are completing the registration process. He also said that an estimated 37,000 volunteers have signed up to help assist young people attending the event.

“As a Church, as a country, we are prepared to welcome thousands of pilgrims,” Archbishop Ulloa said.

However, for organizers of WYD, preparations to receive young pilgrims to the country is more than just an exercise in hospitality, they said. It is a means of spreading the Christian message of welcoming those in need.

The plight of Central American migrants making their way to the U.S. border continues to make headlines around the world and brought to light the dire circumstances that forces men, women and children to embark on such a treacherous journey.

“I believe that this trip will reverberate in the world, but especially in the area of Central America and it will also shed light not only on the reality that we live, but especially the reality lived by young people: of exclusion, of seeing themselves at times forced to immigrate and look for new paths, as well as the reality of violence,” Archbishop Ulloa said.

He also said that the pope’s presence in Panama will be like a soothing “balm and fresh air for our young people to regain their strength.”

Father Aguilar told CNS that the warmth felt in Panama is not only “climatological but also human,” and he said he hoped people opening their homes to young pilgrims will encourage countries to open their doors to those in need.

“We have to give an example, especially in the case of immigration. This phenomenon is very much present in our countries,” he said. “We must be welcoming so that nobody feels in any way that they weren’t allowed in Panama. It is a welcoming country and it will be an example of welcoming for everybody.”