

World Youth Day Cross and Icon in Gizo, Solomon Islands

Today, the fourteenth day since the Major earthquake which devastated many parts of the Gizo Diocese in the Solomon Islands, the World Youth Day Cross and Icon left the island of Ghizo. It has been a remarkable 24 hours during which the Cross brought together people of all ages and allowed them some respite from the Earthquake and Tsunami which have been the total focus of everyone.

The Cross and Icon arrived by boat from the Island of Nusa Tupe- the local airstrip. Due to rough conditions, the Cross could not be unpacked and assembled until it reached the shores of Gizo Town. A politician from Honiara had generously paid for transport of the Cross and Icon from Honiara to Malaita and Ghizo.



For about an hour before the Cross arrived, Gizo itself was remarkably empty. Hundreds of people had gathered at the only intact wharf and there was more excitement and happiness than there has been for a fortnight. Everyone was very good natured with no pushing or jostling. Despite the extra smiles a sombreness still affected the people;

the fact of 53 or more dead, people still missing and thousands of homeless will continue to dampen the normal happiness for many months or even years yet.

The talented Pan Pipers from Vanga Training College led a parade from the wharf to the front of the battered Cathedral where Bishop Bernard O'Grady O.P. welcomed it.



The Cathedral has become a symbol of people and places badly damaged but not destroyed. Although the tower and front of the Cathedral have been severely damaged, the glass cross in the tower escaped destruction and the WYD Cross was slowly raised in front of it to link the two Crosses, signify a rising-up and as a mark of respect.

The Cross was then lowered and taken with the Icon in procession to the side of the Cathedral where hundreds of people gathered in the open. Earlier that morning, several hundred people had attended the open-air Mass in the same location.

There were speeches of welcome and talks about the history of the Cross and Icon with prayers and singing. The Youth of Gizo and a number of surrounding Parishes spent the entire night in the presence of the Cross and Icon with times set aside for singing, prayer, sharings and special silence periods. Minutes after retiring somewhat after midnight, he Bishop and this author leapt out of bed as the Panpipers starting playing in front of the Bishop's House. The nearby Gizo Hotel has often been guilty of playing loud music until about 2.00AM but for the first time ever, the Catholics had their revenge with singing and Panpiping until well after 3.00AM!

The Prime Minister came to town a few hours after the Cross. He is here to personally review progress of relief efforts. This is indeed a good thing, but the focus that afternoon was on the Cross and Icon with many people being unaware of the PM's visit.



Monday morning, a small turnout was expected for the Mass. However, yet again hundreds of people arrived. The Mass was a wonderful experience with the Bishop and six priests concelebrating. It went for a couple of hours with much singing, Custom Dancing at the Offertory and another powerful and down to earth homily linking the symbolism of the Cross, the readings of the day and the experiences of the Earthquake and Tsunami.

After Mass, the Cross was taken several kilometres to "Two Mile" which is one of the camps for many of the displaced people. It was then taken down Gizo's main street and back to the Cathedral. A planned visit to the hospital was called off as nearly all patients have been moved to Munda Hospital on New Georgia Island with others being treated at a field hospital up on the hill.



Finally, after many of the Youth had written names and messages on the carrying cases, the Cross and Icon were packed back into the carrying cases and the 300 Kilogram load was carried back to the wharf for the trip by boat back to Nusa Tupe and then Honiara where crowds of 2,000 or more had previously welcomed it with 1,000 of them walking for hours and carrying the Cross and Icon into the town and Holy Cross Cathedral.

The Youth and their leadership did a fantastic job organising and running this special event. While doing that, they also cleaned streets of debris, fed the hungry and carried tons of rice backwards and forwards between ships, storage areas and helicopters. Many adults were also involved. We all felt the vigour of youth and everyone came together in a special way.

Overall, this was a memorable occasion, not only for the local people, but also for many of those providing aid who remarked on the crowds and “pulling power” of this simple but powerful Cross and Picture of Our Lady and Child Jesus. It went a long way towards helping people as they slowly recover from their traumatic experiences and fears of further disasters as small tremors continue to rock the ground several times a day.

