

# An Unexpected Pilgrimage

When visa issues scuttled three young women's plans to go from Kenya to Portugal for World Youth Day in 2023, they turned to Southeast Asia. Alexia, Yna, and Maryjoy tell their story.

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In August 2023, what started as a setback transformed into an extraordinary pilgrimage. Our original plan was to attend the 2023 World Youth Day, but faced with visa

issues that scuttled our plans for Lisbon we turned our gaze to Southeast Asia. Here, we found a faith that was both familiar and refreshingly novel. This unexpected detour would offer us a unique lens through which to explore, deepen and broaden our understanding of faith.

## **Introduction: An Unexpected Pilgrimage**

In August 2023, three of us, Alexia, Yna, and I (Mj), embarked on an unexpected pilgrimage. Our original plan to attend the 2023 World Youth Day (WYD) in Lisbon, Portugal hit a roadblock due to visa complications. Undeterred, we turned our gaze eastward, creating our own World Youth Day experience in Southeast Asia. Singapore and Malaysia became our new destination, where we aimed to parallel the spiritual journey unfolding at the official

World Youth Day in Portugal. What we encountered was nothing less than transformative.

The trip offered our team of three who had expressed interest in participating in the World Youth Day 2023 an alternative opportunity to cultivate a transforming spiritual experience. While not as ancient or popular pilgrimage destinations as the Holy Land, Italy or other European countries, the Church in Southeast Asia offers a fascinating history, that tells the stories of faith, tenacity, and adaptation that are extremely relevant to our faith today. Understanding the Church's trials and victories in this region and other similar ones, can inspire gratitude for the liberties we sometimes take for granted, and push us to venture outside of our spiritual comfort zones. As we set out with our parents' blessings, we hoped to gain new insights, deepen our faith and

friendship, and experience the global Catholic Church in all its diversity while of course, having fun.

## The Quarantine

Our adventure took an unexpected turn from the moment we landed in Singapore. We were all set for an exciting pilgrimage, but as soon as we landed, we hit a snag due to vaccination timing issue. Singapore had not so long ago changed its rules about the Yellow Fever vaccine.

While the rest of us were okay, I (Mj) didn't meet the new requirement because I had gotten my shot based on the old rules, which we didn't even know had changed.

Back home, Yellow Fever is hardly a topic of conversation; we didn't know anyone who had it or has ever even worried about it. Thus, we were somewhat surprised to encounter stringent vaccination requirements

upon our arrival abroad. It seemed like a joke and then shock on us, I had to go into quarantine. While this was a significant deviation from our plans, and it was challenging to be isolated, as Alexia and Yna had to continued for a few days without me, we understood the importance of adhering to local health regulations for the safety of all. Thankfully, the hotel I was booked into in Novena was beautiful and classy. I had a large window to myself, with a good view of the city, and the expenses were covered by the government. Being stuck in a room alone, however, while knowing my friends were out there, exploring was still such a bummer. Despite the physical separation, we remained connected through daily video calls, sharing our experiences and maintaining the spirit of our journey together.

## Finding Faith in Isolation

Isolated in a hotel room, I found solace in online Catholic resources such as online mass and Opus Dei recollection kits that helped me deepen my faith in isolation. This period of reflection and solitude unexpectedly enriched me and made me appreciate the pilgrimage even more when my quarantine was over.

## The Reunion

When my quarantine ended, I was overjoyed to be reunited with Alexia and Yna. They were coming to pick me up at Novena, but first, I had to catch Mass at the nearby church before we could really start our reunion. The *Novena Church* in Singapore holds a special significance. It's named after the novena prayer devotions reflecting the church's rich tradition of conducting novenas.

*“How do I get to Novena Church from here?” I asked the health officer who was clearing me from quarantine. It was Sunday and I was already late for the Mass that I knew was ongoing at the nearest church from the quarantine hotel.*

*“Oh! Are you Catholic? Me too!” he whispered conspiratorially through his face mask before happily escorting me to the road that would lead me to the church.*

It became a brief yet significant moment of connection. In that instance, I felt as though our differences in race, culture, and nationality faded into the background. The health officer who had previously represented authority and enforcement, transformed into a fellow person of faith. At the same time, he no longer saw me through the lens of my nationality or the health concerns that led to my

quarantine. We were just two individuals united by our shared Catholic faith, finding common ground in our faith.

After Mass, it was a relief and a thrill to be back together with Yna and Alexia. This unexpected change in our plans taught us a valuable lesson about the nature of a pilgrimage. It reminded us that a spiritual pilgrimage is more than just physical travel. It is a spiritual journey in which every hardship and unexpected obstacle, if embraced with love, serves as a chance to come closer to God. We learned a deep lesson about accepting our emotional, spiritual, and bodily struggles as an integral part of the pilgrimage.

After reconnecting with Alexia and Yna, we deepened our commitment to explore as many parts of Singapore and Malaysia as we could.

While we explored the city, we made time for Mass, visited the Blessed Sacrament, and prayed the rosary as we walked to various parts of town or to tourist attractions.

The level of devotion we observed at every Mass we attended left an unforgettable impression on us. Churches in Singapore, including the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd and Church of the Sacred Heart, as well as the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist and the Catholic Church of the Holy Rosary in Kuala Lumpur, were almost full thirty minutes before Mass began, whether on a weekday or a weekend. This punctuality and the earnest preparation of the congregants struck a chord with us. After Alexia brought it to our attention, Yna and I (Mj) realised that it was something we had also observed. The level of devotion was evident, and it made an effect that would last a lifetime.

Sometimes while in Church waiting for mass, Yna would share an article for spiritual reading, to also help us prepare.

Our presence as black travellers in Southeast Asia naturally drew attention, creating a unique platform for engagement. In every setting, from the vibrant market areas to the tranquil neighbourhoods, this visibility gave us more opportunities for interaction with the locals and tourists.

## **WYD 2023 Theme: Mary Arose and Went with Haste**

As part of our pilgrimage plan, we aimed to engage with and interrogate the World Youth Day theme of “Mary arose and went with haste.” As explained by Pope Francis, this theme reflects Mary’s immediate trust and action following God’s call,

setting aside her own concerns to serve Elizabeth.

We chose to delve into this theme one day, as we waited for lunch at “Little Italy,” a cozy Italian restaurant in Singapore. We contrasted Pope Francis’s views on Mary’s selflessness with a transactional take on relationships that we’d come across on Tiktok. Yna brought up the TikTok video, sparking a debate on whether our relationships mirror Mary’s unconditional service. As we delved into this discussion, we realized the stark difference between today’s often reciprocal expectations and Mary’s prompt, self-giving action that expected nothing in return. As we exchanged ideas, we found ourselves inspired to question how we could embody Mary’s readiness to act selflessly, challenging the transactional tendencies of some of today’s social interactions.

# No Borders, No Limits

Our trip took us from the bustling streets of Singapore to the vibrant landscapes of Malaysia and back, immersing us in the rich cultural diversity and distinct cuisines of both countries. The traditions, languages, and food we encountered made a lasting impression on us.

In Kuala Lumpur (KL), a chance encounter at Mass turned special when we recognized the accent of a Kenyan woman taking the readings at St John the Evangelist Catholic Church. It was comforting to hear a familiar tone so far from home, and it sparked an immediate connection. After Mass, we chatted and learned that the graceful lady was an expatriate from Kenya, living and working in Malaysia. She kindly offered to show us around, driving us around the city to ensure we got the best views. She also acted as a guide

and through her eyes, we saw Kuala Lumpur in a new light, gaining insights that only a local could offer. At the end we had a photo shoot moment and exchanged hugs, and numbers to stay in touch.

Another church we visited in KL was the Church of the Holy Rosary. This church acquired its name due to its dedication to the Rosary, symbolizing the community's deep connection to this prayer. Located at Jalan Tun Sambanthan in KL, the church is beautiful and is considered one of the finest examples of neo-gothic architecture in Malaysia.

*“Hello. Did you miss the bus too?” A young lady who seemed to be of Chinese origin politely asked us. We had been at the bus station in Kuala Lumpur for almost an hour, waiting in vain for a bus that would have taken us to the Awana SkyWay cable car station.*

“Yes.” Yna sighed, reflecting our collective disappointment. We had been looking forward all week to seeing the Genting Highlands from a cable car view. But the bus that would have taken us to the station had seemingly disappeared.

“Why don’t we team up and take a cab to the highlands? We can split the fare,” suggested the lady, her timely offer feeling nothing short of a divine intervention.

*In the cab, a sense of friendship quickly developed, even though we had just been strangers moments before. We chatted as easily as if we’d known each other for years. Even the cab driver got swept up in our enthusiasm and began adding his own stories to our conversation.*

*After splitting the taxi fare with our newfound Chinese friend, it felt only natural to stick together for the cable car ride. As we climbed higher, the*

*Genting Highlands stretched out below us in all their glory. We were all caught up in the view, pointing out sights to each other, taking photos to capture the moment, and sharing in the excitement as though we had known each other our entire lifetime.*

*When we finally parted ways, it was bittersweet.*

*“Look for me if you ever visit China!”*

*“Look for us if you ever visit Kenya!”*

## **Reflections**

Reflecting on our time spent in Southeast Asia, we realized that this wasn't just a backup plan; it felt like it was meant to be our path.

Although exhausted, we were somewhat re-energized. Our experience showed us that it is not the destination, but the pilgrim's journey with God, that matters most on a pilgrimage. While Lisbon

remained out of reach, the essence of World Youth Day pilgrimage remained with us, having fun while deepening our faith. Discovering profound experiences and connections in unlikely places with unlikely persons.

Upon our return to Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, an immigration officer playfully asked if we had travelled out to escape our country's difficulties. I responded light-heartedly, "No, we were on a mission." Indeed, it was a mission that deepened our friendship, and allowed us to forge new friendships along the way. From our profound discussions over lunch and dinner or as we strolled in a mall about the world youth day theme and topics, to discussions around authentic friendships and healthy boundary setting, to participating in the solemnity of the Assumption in Singapore, and to sharing a taxi and

experiencing the stunning views of the Genting Highlands with a newfound friend, to connecting with a fellow Kenyan in Kuala Lumpur, each moment was priceless.

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