Voices of Sisters
Ministry



Sr. Maximiliana Şanta leading a large group through a catechetical activity during World Youth Day in Lisbon, August 2023. (Courtesy of the Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great)



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I had the opportunity to be among two million young people in Lisbon where World Youth Day took place from August 2-6. I participated as the head of the Youth and Children Pastoral Office of the Greek-Catholic Diocese of Cluj-Gherla at this event, along with a group of young people from that diocese. I started this journey under the protection of Our Lady of Fatima.

As soon as we arrived in Lisbon, our group directed our steps and hearts to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fatima. There, we prayed together for all young people, especially those who remained at home. We also prayed for all those we held in our hearts. I was deeply moved seeing dozens and dozens of groups of young people arriving at the Sanctuary of Fatima, wearing the World Youth Day badge and remaining immersed in prayer at the feet of the Blessed Mother.

We experienced intense spiritual moments together, and we had great moments with wonderful people. I made friends with people from all around the world, including Spain, Portugal, Venezuela, Slovakia, the USA, Colombia, France, Japan, Mexico and more. I even had the joy of meeting a missionary priest from Japan.



Sr. Maximiliana Şanta leading a Rise Up meeting activity with a group of Romanian young people at World Youth Day in Lisbon, August 2023. (Courtesy of the Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great)

I attended Mass and the Rise Up meetings conducted in Romanian at the parish of St. Francis of Assisi for three consecutive days. At a Rise Up meeting, I was asked by Reverend Claudiu Pop, the Greek-Catholic Bishop of Cluj-Gherla, to animate the 500 young people from Romania, introducing them to moments of catechesis. Though my contribution was simple and conveyed through gestures, it held deep significance. It was incredibly moving to stand before 500 young people, along with priests, consecrated persons, and five bishops, and witness them all embracing the gestures I suggested in one youthful spirit.

I challenged everyone, in keeping with the Rise Up theme of reconciliation, to pick up a pebble from the yard and hold onto it.

Following this, I said to them: "Look at the pebble in your hand and analyze it. ... It is stiff, angular, and heavy. You can hurt someone with it, or you can be hurt by it. Now, I invite you to look within yourselves. ... It is the same with our sin-laden soul. Sins make us stiff, closing us off. We experience pain, and we can inflict it upon others. Now I invite you to approach this Crucifix, to come and lay down this stone at the feet of Jesus. What matters the most is to free our soul from all our pebbles as we head for the confessional."

There was a deep silence; everyone was contemplative. Silent tears were flowing on some faces. Every young person and participant walked the way to the crucifix in the church. They were experiencing many emotions as they left the stone they had in their hand.

I am grateful to the Lord for the gifts bestowed upon me, especially for the gift of consecrated life, the youthfulness and joy within my soul. These gifts helped me to draw close to young people, feeling their desire for my presence. Both young women and men wanted to take pictures with me, sit next to me or share a meal. These were simple gestures, but this is where they had an opportunity to ask questions and share their concerns. Witnessing their disorientation, their lack of purpose in life, and their profound need to be heard, appreciated, and involved in the church, deeply moved me. The wall they felt between them and the people in the church — priests, bishops, and consecrated persons — became evident. I tried to address the questions I could answer while I urged others to seek answers from the bishops who held Rise Up, and they listened to me. This process allowed them to receive answers.

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It was a unique experience to be in the presence of millions of young people. The radiant joy on their faces, warm smiles, heartfelt hugs and respect was evident. Most importantly, the thirst of young people to communicate, to share their troubles, to be listened to, and to be in communion with others transcended any barrier, regardless of nationality. All of us, united around a common focal point: Jesus.

Neither heat nor fatigue prevented us from participating in the programs, side by side with His Holiness Pope Francis. He encouraged us to accept ourselves as we are because Christ also accepts and loves us as we are. He urged us to be the first to start the change we want. Lisbon streets overflowed with lively, faith-filled young people on the first day during the opening ceremony at "Colina do Encontro." A common longing to encounter Christ and one another surpassed considerations of color and age. Nothing stopped people from shaking hands, looking into each other's eyes and smiling.

A young man of Indian descent approached me in a crowded bus. He offered me a medal. In return, I offered him my one-decade rosary, explaining that it held personal significance. His response touched me: "I always get bored with the rosary, but because it's yours and you gave it to me, from today on, I will pray on it."

Another significant and profound moment was the Way of the Cross with the Holy Father, Pope Francis. Both the well-chosen meditations and the "living testimonies" from some of the young people, along with the choreography, really brought their lives and the current world — with its pains, loneliness, challenges and restlessness, before Jesus through prayer. The desire for reconciliation, regret for the times when they refused the love of Jesus, yet also the longing to remain close to God, could be read on the faces of the young people. The next morning, I was deeply moved to witness a park full of young people waiting in line, hundreds of confessionals set up, seeking Jesus for a new life, cleansed through confession.

It was very difficult to move from one place to another; buses and lanes overflowed with cheerful young people. On the final day, as we headed to Campo da Graca for the upcoming night vigil, we experienced a 40-minute subway delay. Every subway that arrived at the station was full. Finally, we managed to board the third subway. Despite all these obstacles, we didn't stop on our way. We never saw young people giving up.



Sr. Maximiliana Şanta at the World Youth Day in Lisbon, August 2023. (Courtesy of the Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great)

We set off on a six-hour hike along the highway, with temperatures of 43 degrees Celsius, bags ready for an outdoor sleepover, and enough food for a day. We all maintained the same pace — not faster, not slower. Some people prayed, and others sang. Some people were battling fatigue and heat exhaustion, but we all walked in the same direction for the night vigil — for an encounter with Jesus.

The courage of the young people, their yearning for Christ, and their hunger for communication and interaction with others filled me with admiration. They forgot about fatigue, hunger and the heat of the sun. Leaving their comfort zones, they embraced something different — they were immersed in prayer. When I looked around, I saw young people kneeling, silent young people — one thought, one prayer. I had the impression that the sky had united with the earth.

It's hard to put into words all the moments and emotions I experienced these days. It was certainly a unique and spiritually enriching experience. I am grateful to God that I was chosen to go.

Participation in World Youth Day will undoubtedly leave a mark on many young hearts, change many lives, and inspire many to seek new dimensions. When we returned, it was difficult to say goodbye. The Lisbon airport was full of young people exchanging tender gestures and warm embraces — expressions full of love and

longing. I wish that the wise words of the Holy Father will continue to resound in the hearts of young people and that they will continue to be "surfers of love." I hope they will continue to walk with a purpose and to prepare every day of their lives.

As The Holy Father said at the vigil: Nothing in life is free except the love of Jesus. Joy is missionary. Do we want to keep it for ourselves or share it with others?