When I first heard that SLU would be gathering a group to attend the World Youth Day celebration in Krakow, I thought of my old friend who came to Madrid for that reason in 2011. Although he told me about his experience, I still wasn’t sure of what to expect aside from just a few masses with the Pope. It turned out to be much more than I had imagined. Instead of just one week in Krakow, we spent half of a month journeying from Madrid on a bus, stopping throughout France, Germany, Poland, and Italy as we drove to and from our destination. We visited cathedrals and basilicas as well as holy sites and other monuments during our cross-continental pilgrimage with the local Cursillos organization.

Traveling is a passion of mine, but that was not the reason we drove across Europe. We visited foreign cities and towns along the way, but we did not come as tourists. We came as pilgrims. Every kilometer of our trip was a kilometer closer to God. It was not a solemn trip, but a celebratory one meant to bring out the enthusiasm of our faith. Between the many songs and chants, we prayed together and held in depth discussions about the religion that we share.

Our first stop on the way to Poland was Lourdes, France. Made famous by the appearance of the Virgin Mary to young St. Bernadette, this little town was a special place to visit. To see the grotto where St. Bernadette had her many apparitions struck each of us as we imagined the Mother of God standing in place of the statue that had been put up. This small town set the atmosphere for the rest of our journey. That night, we were led into a massive subterranean basilica and laid out our sleeping bags. The concrete was cold and hard, but we were happy to have been offered a place to rest. After leaving Lourdes two days later we made our way to Lyon where we had the chance to visit the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist and the Basilica of Our Lady of Fourvière, one of the most beautiful churches I have ever seen.

After a pleasant evening drive through the French countryside, we arrived at the sports complex where we would be sleeping in Trier, Germany. The next day, we met outside the Benedictine Abbey of St. Matthew. The priests held a prayer service for everyone in the plaza and then we went inside to view the relics of Matthew the Apostle, another profound experience for us. Afterwards, we gathered and sat down to listen to a speech prepared by one of the other pilgrims in our group. This speech and those that would come later provided the basis for our group discussions which really drew us closer to each other as we talked about our own experiences and feelings within Catholicism. We later left for Frankfurt where, despite the short amount of time, we managed to attend mass in the impressive Cathedral of St. Bartholomew before leaving for Wroclaw, Poland.

Just after crossing the Polish border, we made our usual rest stop. However, this one lasted all night. While the many bus drivers had to wait for special Polish licenses, we realized we would be stuck there for a while. Despite the delay, we learned a variety of Spanish games to pass the time and chanted our songs as we waited for the next day when we would reach Wroclaw. Finally, after a short drive, we arrived at the parish where we met our host families. Thanks to them, we came to know Poland better than we had thought we would. They showed us around town, cooked some great local food, and taught us some Polish in the meantime. During our time in the city we went to a few concerts organized through the WYD, potted and handed out flowers, and had a party with the members of our host parish. Czestochowa was our next stop. We met with the other half of our group
who couldn’t join us in Madrid, then celebrated mass in a field outside of the basilica where Pope John Paul II had celebrated mass in front of more than 1.5 million people 25 years earlier. It was unbearably hot and then very rainy, but the experience was wonderful. Before leaving for Krakow, we visited the basilica and viewed the painting of the Black Madonna, supposedly painted by St. Luke.

More host families waited for us outside of Krakow in a town called Sobolów. Just as in Wroclaw, not all of the families spoke English or Spanish, making communication a bit like a fun game of charades at times. Despite the language barrier, we were grateful to be given a roof above our heads with warm food and a bed. From there, we took a crowded train into the city with pilgrims from all over the world. It was hot and humid, but that didn’t stop anyone from finishing the last leg of the trip into Krakow to celebrate mass with more than a million people from almost every country on Earth. The field was packed and we could hardly see the altar past all of the flags in the air, but one flag in particular caught our attention: The Billiken. We made our way over to find that SLU Missouri had sent a group of pilgrims as well. Friends we had made while they studied in Madrid were ecstatic to see us and we noted how lucky we were to have found each other in that sea of people. On the way back to the train station, we got another surprise when Pope Francis rode down the street, cheerfully waving to everyone on the sidewalk as he passed us. Over the next week we visited the Divine Mercy Sanctuary dedicated to St. Faustina, got to know the little town of Bochnia outside of Krakow, watched an artistic presentation of the Stations of the Cross, and listened to the words of Pope Francis. The last night of the WYD consisted of Eucharistic adoration and a closing concert in a large field where all of the pilgrims slept in our sleeping bags. The morning after we celebrated the closing mass with Pope Francis who announced that the next WYD will be held in Panama. Soon after, we left Krakow along with the thousands of other pilgrims, but that was not the end of our trip.

On the way back to Madrid, we stopped in Turin, Italy to visit the Basilica of Our Lady Help of Christians. Here we had lunch in the sanctuary and played football with some local kids. After mass, we walked to the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist where the remains of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati were brought back from Krakow for the WYD celebration. A prayer service was held and later we adored the Shroud of Turin, which was unfortunately not on display. Early the next morning, we had our final mass together and drove along the Mediterranean back into Spain.

All of the hours spent together singing and dancing our way across Europe are memories that will last a lifetime. Seeing that the entire world had done the same showed me how alive Catholicism really is. We met dozens of people from dozens of other countries who were just like us despite our different backgrounds. We were all Catholics celebrating our belief in the same God. This pilgrimage has not only left me with great memories and many friends, but also a renewed sense and meaning of faith.

-Nicholas Edmundson