

# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC YOUTH FESTIVAL



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## MEDIA RELEASE

### **“BECOME WHO GOD MADE YOU TO BE”: POPE LEO XIV INSPIRES THOUSANDS AT OPENING OF ACYF 2025**

Thousands of young Catholics from across Australia filled the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre today for the highly anticipated opening of the 2025 Australian Catholic Youth Festival—an energetic celebration of faith and the first time it has been hosted in Melbourne since 2013.

At the heart of the opening plenary was a surprise video message from His Holiness, Pope Leo XIV, who offered a personal and warm encouragement to young Australians to embrace their God-given identity and walk boldly as disciples in today’s world.

“Our lives find their ultimate purpose in becoming who God made us to be, by living out his will,” the Holy Father said, recalling the words of Pope Benedict XVI. “You are not the result of a random process. Each of you is willed, each of you is loved, each of you is necessary.”

Pope Leo urged young people not to be discouraged by cultural trends that dismiss traditional values or isolate individuals despite the promise of connection.

“Technology may connect us,” he noted, “but it can also leave us more isolated.”

Instead, he offered a solution grounded in truth: “Turn to God, especially through prayer and the sacraments. That’s where you’ll hear your Heavenly Father’s voice most clearly.”

The Pope concluded by calling on young pilgrims to draw inspiration from the lives of saints such as St Catherine of Siena, St Carlo Acutis, and St Pier Giorgio Frassati, and to return home ready to “build up the Kingdom of God in your local communities.”

Ahead of the Pope’s message, Melbourne Archbishop Peter A Comensoli, offered a heartfelt welcome to the thousands of young people gathered under the banner of *Pilgrims of Hope*.

“Whatever reason has brought you here, somehow Jesus had a part in that,” he said. “You belong here. I want to welcome you to your new house—this house of the Church. And it’s your house too.”

Reflecting on the theme of “pilgrimage,” Archbishop Comensoli encouraged young people to consider where they are in their faith journey.

“He wanted you to be here; he’s had an invite waiting for you. You belong here. So, welcome to your house, this house of the Church.”

Closing out the opening plenary was a stirring address by Ukrainian Mykola Cardinal Bychok CSsR, who shared a deeply personal story of growing up in a persecuted Church under Soviet rule.

“I remember watching my parents praying quietly—just simple, trusting faith,” Cardinal Bychok said.

“Prayer became, for me, like oxygen—quiet, invisible, but necessary for life.”

He spoke candidly of being bullied as a child for his faith and challenged the young crowd to remain courageous in their witness.

“The world may try to silence your faith, but it can never silence your prayer,” he said. “When you pray—especially when it is difficult—you allow God to speak into the deepest part of your heart.”

“Even the smallest whispered prayer reaches the ear of God. No government can ban it. No bully can break it. No social pressure can erase it. Your prayer is your strength. Your prayer is your freedom. Your prayer is your hope.”

Holding up a handmade rosary crafted by Ukrainian prisoners of war, Cardinal Bychok offered a powerful symbol of hope and resilience.

“These young men and women—your peers—have endured suffering most of us cannot imagine. Yet in their darkest moments, they turned to God. Their hands, which once defended their homeland, now shape beads of hope.”

He concluded by inviting all present to join him in praying a decade of the Holy Rosary for peace—especially in Ukraine—and for all nations wounded by war and injustice.

Earlier in the afternoon, thousands took part in a 5km pilgrimage walk from St Patrick’s Cathedral to the Festival venue. Accompanied by the World Youth Day Cross and Icon, which returned to Australia for the first time in 20 years, the walk was a moving public witness to the faith, diversity and youthful vibrancy of the Church in Australia.

Over the next two days, pilgrims will engage in over 100 workshops, daily Mass, concerts, and sacred prayer experiences—carrying with them the words of the Holy Father and the challenge to live out their faith with openness and curiosity, with joy, excitement and, above all, courage.

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**Photos from Day 1 can be accessed by [Clicking Here.](#)**

Please credit as follows: *"Photo: ACYF/Archdiocese of Melbourne"*

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