



Why is World Youth Day important?

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National Catholic Reporter, August 12, 2005 Vol. 4, No. 44

For full article: <http://www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/#wyd>

First, in many parts of the world, including the developed West, the Catholic Church faces a severe vocations crisis. In 1970, the Catholic Church had one priest for every 1,000 Catholics in the world; in 2000, the ratio was one priest for every 2,500 Catholics. (While the number of priests actually increased slightly from 1961 to 2001, it did not keep pace with the rise in Catholic population.

The worst-hit area was Europe; the number of secular and religious clergy in Europe dropped from 241,379 in 1976 to 217,275 in 1995.) This is not just a management or staffing issue, but one that cuts to the core of the Catholic Church's capacity to make the sacraments available to the faithful. The ability to inspire new vocations to the priesthood, therefore, has to rank among the most important tasks of any bishop, and a fortiori, of the pope. World Youth Day is a privileged forum for "recruiting." Around the world today, one can find seminarians and newly ordained priests who report that their first inkling of a vocation came as part of the World Youth Day experience. Many report that it was the invitation issued by John Paul II, coupled with admiration of his example, which caused the notion to blossom. To date, these vocations have not offset the long-term trends, but the situation would be worse without them.

Second, World Youth Day is the largest regular gathering of Catholics in the world, and therefore offers the pope a critically important opportunity to exercise his "bully pulpit." Any event that involves a million people will draw media attention, and the theatre of a high papal Mass offers the global press irresistible imagery. All of this means that when Benedict XVI speaks in Cologne, the world will be listening in a way it generally doesn't to papal addresses. (Some 4,000 journalists are already accredited for the event). It's an "at-bat" for the pope as a global communicator, and whether he strikes out or knocks it out of the park will make a difference in the Catholic Church's capacity to "evangelize," meaning to spread its message.

Third, youth are critical to a pope's capacity to lift the church out of the ideological ruts of a given era. Adults tend to become locked in debates over a limited set of issues, recycling those arguments in endless combinations. In the 16th and 17th centuries, for example, Jesuits and Dominicans clashed over competing theories of grace; in the 19th century, Catholic democrats and Catholic traditionalists locked horns over the "Roman question"; today, "liberals" and "conservatives" go at one another over sexuality, dissent, and the authority of the pope. Sometimes resolution of these debates is less a matter of victory for one side, than the capacity to see the entire matter in a new light. That's what young Catholics have to offer – a fresh perspective, not defined by the categories of the past. In order for that to work, young people have to be willing to invest their energy and

creativity in the church. World Youth Day has the capacity to awaken such passion and commitment.

If Benedict XVI wants to challenge the dictatorship of relativism in the West, he's going to need motivated, well-formed youth, and there's no place like World Youth Day to assemble his team. The extent to which Benedict XVI succeeds in connecting with the youth who assemble to hear him in Cologne, therefore, should tell us a great deal about where his pontificate is headed.