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A vision that includes youth, elderly

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World Youth Day 2013
Aboard the papal plane

One definition of vision is the ability to answer questions before others even know to ask them, and Pope Francis on Monday provided a compelling example vis-à-vis World Youth Day aboard the papal plane en route to Rio de Janeiro.

In effect, the question Francis answered was: What will his personal imprint be on World Youth Day? Catholicism's premier regularly occurring global event is more or less the church's version of the Olympic Games, after all.

In a word, under Francis, World Youth Days will also be about the elderly.

Known around the Catholic world by its Italian acronym "GMG," or *Giornata Mondiale della Gioventù*, the event was launched under John Paul II in the mid-1980s and became a lynchpin of his strategy of reviving the church's missionary muscle.

Under Benedict, World Youth Days continued to serve this purpose, but they also took on a more devotional tone: Among other things, Benedict promoted the practice of eucharistic adoration. They also became a more explicit incubator of vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

An obvious question this week, therefore, is what new emphasis Francis might impart to the event.

(For the record, "World Youth Day" is actually a weeklong gathering. This year, it's taking place July 23-28 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.)

Almost before it occurred to anyone to ask, Francis sketched a vision for the event's future well before he arrived in Rio de Janeiro, an outing that also marks the first overseas journey of his papacy.

In a brief five-minute overview for reporters on the papal plane, Francis said he wants to reach out to youth on this trip but as part of the broader "social fabric." In particular, he said, he wanted to emphasize concern for elderly people, too, who just as often fall victim to a "throw-away culture".

"Many times, I think we do an injustice to the elderly by setting them aside," Francis said, "as if they don't have anything to give us. But they can give us the wisdom of life, the wisdom of the past, the wisdom of our country and our family. We need this."

"So, I'm going [to Brazil] to meet the youth, yes, but within their social fabric, principally with the elderly," he said.

What might this new emphasis on what the pope called a "culture of inclusion, of encounter" mean if Catholic leaders take his vision to heart?

First, it probably doesn't mean changing the formal name of the event to "World Youth and Elderly Persons Day," among other things because it's tough to imagine that legions of elderly Catholics would be inclined to make the lengthy and sometimes arduous journeys involved.

(Francis himself, of course, is actually a counterexample; at 76, he would meet virtually any society's definition of a senior citizen. Not every elderly pilgrim, however, could charter his own commercial airliner.)

One can imagine, however, World Youth Day adopting a "preferential option" for the elderly in at least three other ways.

First, young pilgrims could be encouraged to reach out to elderly persons in the locales in which the event takes place -- visiting homes for senior citizens, for instance, or visiting families in which elderly members play a prominent role.

Second, participants might be encouraged to work on oral history projects either on the ground during the event or back home once they've returned, collecting the testimonies of elderly Catholics about how the church and the world have changed during their lifetimes, what's stayed with them despite those changes, and so on. In that way, the testimony of the older generation would be preserved and transmitted.

Third, the catechism sessions during World Youth Days might no longer be entrusted exclusively to bishops. (These sessions are organized by language group during the early period of the week, before the mega-events with the pope, and are designed in part to prepare the youth to understand and assimilate the pope's message.)

Instead, one could envision elderly laymen and women being asked to speak -- not precisely as teachers of the faith but, as Francis said Monday, as vessels for insight into "life, the past, the country and the family."

These are no more than three for-instances of what could be a broader rethink of WYD with the elderly in mind.

By placing emphasis on the elderly, one could argue that Francis is displaying a keen awareness of demographic trends.

In the United States, for instance, the median age was 30 in 1950, but it will reach 41 by 2050. In Europe it will be 47.1, and in Japan a staggering 52.3. By the end of the 21st century, the share of the global population over 60 will rise from 10 to 22 percent, giving the entire planet a median age similar to that of Western Europe today.

In 2050, there will be almost 2 billion people over the age of 60. As the U.S. President's Council on Bioethics stated in 2005, we are on the brink of becoming a "mass geriatric society."

Demographic experts often call this rapid expansion of the elderly population the "Grayby Boom," a play on the "baby boom" in the 1960s.

In the United States alone, by 2050 Americans over 65 will outnumber those under 14 by more than 16 million, although they're basically the same today. The population of "old olds," meaning those above 85, will increase four-fold.

In that context, solidarity between young and old could emerge as a special challenge social and political challenge -- and Francis may well be positioning the Catholic church to be a more relevant force in those transitions.

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