NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Francis a 'one-man show,' Brooklyn's DiMarzio says

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 23, 2013 NCR Today
World Youth Day 2013
Rio de Janeiro

Brooklyn has the largest American delegation at the July 23-28 World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, with some 300 people here as the diocesan contingent. The turnout reflects a calculation that the experience is always worth it, in part for its intangible spiritual fruits and in part for the imminently practical reason that it's a proven incubator for vocations.

Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, 69 -- who's nobody's idea of a pie-in-the-sky personality -- says he believes roughly 10 of his 65 current seminarians, or 15 percent, found the roots of their calling at a World Youth Day, and that tells him the investment of time and treasure is worth it.

DiMarzio sat down Tuesday morning for an interview with *NCR* at the Rio hotel where the American bishops are staying to talk about the experience and to share some initial impressions of his new boss, Pope Francis.

One interesting insight from DiMarzio: He sees Francis, if not quite as a "Lone Ranger," at least as a "one-man show" without the usual retinue of aides and helpers who form a pope's team. It will be interesting to watch, he suggested, how that style of leadership plays out over the long term.

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How do you explain the large turnout from Brooklyn?

We've got a tradition that didn't start with me, although I've developed it. We always come ... the two auxiliary bishops are here, too, so all three of us came. It's really an opportunity to get to know the young people and to promote vocations, too. [The 2008 World Youth Day in Sydney] was a rough one because of the expense, so we had about 120. For the last one in Madrid, we had 500. This time we have about 350.

I describe Brooklyn as a "big small diocese." We're 180 square miles with about 1.6 million Catholics. There's kind of an intimacy and an ability to organize things that you don't have in other dioceses. We have a very good organizer, Fr. Gerard Sauer, who organizes all our pilgrimages. We went to Lourdes, for instance, for the 150th anniversary and brought about 300 people. He's good at it.

We're not a rich diocese, and our young people work for the money to do it. We've got everybody under the sun as part of our group.

You talked about vocations. Do you have some "WYD priests" in Brooklyn?

Definitely, we see them in the seminary now. It makes an impression to see all these young people from all over the world who have faith. It's a great encouragement to people, and we've seen vocations come out of it. It's not just priests, because I've also seen a couple of women's vocations come out of it. It's more than worth the trouble

to do this.

Of course, everybody who takes part strengthens their faith. All the young people come away from this a bit changed. They see the church differently, and maybe they see the world differently. Some of them have never traveled, and they have an opportunity to see their lives and their faith in a different way.

Can you give me a sense of numbers? How many WYD vocations are we talking about?

I have about 65 seminarians, and I'd say there are at least 10 who were World Youth Day vocations. We have 10 seminarians with us right now because we want them to talk the young people too.

One in six or seven doesn't sound bad.

It's a good average. Of course, some of these people were already thinking about it, but this solidifies it. They see the church in a different way, they see the Holy Father, they see a million or more people coming together.

How much of the interest this time is related to Francis?

I think whoever the Holy Father is, these people are going to come. Obviously, he's a little bit different than the others, and maybe that's encouraged some people. This was planned long before he ascended to the papacy, almost two years ago, because it takes that long to put it together.

What vibe do you pick up back home about the new pope?

It's very positive. They see him as very humble, very simple, down to earth, a man who wants to be close to the people. We have to see what he's going to do, but he's already made a great impression. They say he's a "people's pope." He takes that tack, wanting to stay close to people ... not living in the papal palace and all those little signs.

We called John Paul II the "people's pope" too. What's different about Francis?

This pope is kind of a one-man show, in some ways. He's doing it on his own. That's the big difference. John Paul had a team, and you knew who his helpers were. I don't even know if this pope has a secretary. That's a big difference. I wouldn't call him a 'Lone Ranger," but he's sort of a single player, and that changes things. It'll be interesting to see how it develops.

Brazil is the biggest Catholic country in the world. Do you think this trip can help the church here?

Brazilians are certainly excited. My nephew married a Brazilian girl so I went up north for the weekend and got to see how people think. I celebrated Mass in Portuguese at 7 a.m., and there were at least 1,500 people in this huge church. I don't know where they all came from, but it was full.

There's a lot of infiltration of the "sects" here, and they really are "sects," not the mainline churches. One was recently exposed as really a sort of money-making scheme, and it brought some people to their senses that these things aren't always for real. At the same time, people are being nourished by the Word of God in different ways. We have to ask why we're not attracting people. It's clear that there is a disaffection among some with the church. Some say as many as 2 million Catholics in the last decade have moved over. Some may return, missing the sacraments, but it's still a real problem.

To be clear, I don't think competition is a good thing in religion. It works well in capitalism, but not in religion. I think we've got to say what we believe, preach it well and enthusiastically, and people will come.

What about dialogue with these groups?

It's very difficult to dialogue with them because I don't think they want to dialogue with us. They see their role as poachers. You see that in the U.S., too. There's very little dialogue with some of these evangelical groups.

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