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Memo to Francis: Older folks already at WYD

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

On the plane en route to Brazil on Monday, Pope Francis suggested World Youth Day should include outreach for the elderly, too, bringing together the energy of youth with the wisdom of old age. In a way, that's hard to miss once you start thinking about it; however, that's clearly already part of the program.

While Tuesday was a rest day for Francis, the opening Mass of World Youth Day on Tuesday night on Rio's Copacabana beach featured two prelates in their 60s: Polish Cardinal Stanislaw Rylko on behalf of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Laity and Brazilian Archbishop Orani João Tempesta of Rio on behalf of the local church. Also celebrating the Mass was the Vatican's Cardinal Secretary of State, Tarcisio Bertone, who's 78.

Starting Wednesday, young pilgrims will spend much of the next three days in catechetical sessions with bishops from various parts of the world, organized by language group. English speakers, for instance, will hear Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York on Wednesday and Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston on Friday.

In terms of ages, Dolan and O'Malley are 63 and 69, respectively. Of course, the real star of the show, the pope himself, is a robust 76.

If Francis wants the young pilgrims to be exposed to the elderly, one could actually say: Welcome to the party, because without really even trying, World Youth Day is already pretty strong on intergenerational transfer.

Tuesday's Mass brought a crowd the Vatican estimated at between 500,000 and 600,000 to the Rio beachfront despite Brazil's winter cold and sometimes driving rain. For several hours in the afternoon, the sounds of warm-up acts dominated the downtown area as pious prayer alternated with pumped-up Christian pop. The main celebrant was Tempesta, a Cistercian who reflects the socially conscious ethos of the Brazilian church.

Last month, as massive street protests in Rio and other Brazilian cities gave voice to popular frustration over perceived inequalities and failures in education and health care, Tempesta drew a parallel with this week's gathering of Catholic youth.

The demonstrations, he said, are "similar to the spirit of World Youth Day -- the desire to work together for a new world, for a new life."

He returned to a similar theme Tuesday night, challenging the hundreds of thousands of young pilgrims to blend "an authentically Christian life" with "the social consequences of the Gospel."

"We are called to be protagonists of a new world," Tempesta told them.

Tempesta allowed himself a small burst of regional pride, saying it was God's providence that allowed "the first Latin American pope in history" to "trod the soil of Latin America at the sanctuary of the world's youth that this

city has become in these days."

For his part, Rylko told the young pilgrims that "God has many surprises in store for you" during these days in Rio.

Saying that World Youth Day this time around is unfolding under the protection of the giant statue of Christ the Redeemer that dominates the Rio skyline, Rylko invited the youth "to entrust to him the most difficult choices you're forced to make, the fears and worries that live in your young hearts."

Rylko also challenged the pilgrims to "go out with courage to the geographic and existential 'peripheries' of the world," citing an image invoked by Pope Francis in a speech before the cardinals during pre-conclave meetings in March.

Then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio told his fellow cardinals gathering to elect a successor to Benedict XVI that the church should move out "to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all misery."

With the benefit of hindsight, many cardinals said later the speech played an important role in consolidating support for Francis.

Pope Francis on Wednesday makes a pilgrimage to the Marian shrine of Aparecida, located roughly 150 miles southwest of Rio. Later in the afternoon, he'll visit a hospital operated by Third Order Franciscans and dedicated to care of alcohol and drug addicts.

World Youth Day culminates later in the week with the Via Crucis procession in the streets of Rio on Friday, a youth vigil with the pope Saturday night, and the concluding open-air Mass on Sunday.

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