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Estimate: 3 million for Francis at Copacabana

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 27, 2013 NCR Today
World Youth Day 2013
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Calling on young people to be "athletes of Christ," Pope Francis on Saturday addressed a vast throng gathered on Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana beach that was officially estimated by the local police and mayor's office, according to a Vatican spokesperson, at 3 million people.

Assuming that figure is accurate, it shatters the record of 1.7 million drawn to Copacabana by the Rolling Stones in 2006 and comes close to the 4 million people John Paul II was estimated to have attracted for the World Youth Day in Manila in 1995.

Francis retouched his remarks just hours before the gathering to reflect the fact that it was originally scheduled to take place in an open field roughly 30 miles outside of town, but had to be moved because rain earlier in the week turned the field into a swamp.

As he has throughout the trip, Francis used simple pastoral language Saturday, saying the image of the field calls to mind Brazil's national passion with soccer -- or, as they say virtually everywhere but the United States, football.

"Now, what do players do when they are asked to join a team?" the pope asked the youth. "They have to train, and to train a lot."

In the same way, he said, one must train in the faith in order to become an effective disciple and missionary.

"Dear young people, be true athletes of Christ," the pope said.

As part of that training, Francis urged the youth not to be "part-time Christians, 'starchy' and superficial, but real."

"I am sure that you don't want to be duped by a false freedom, always at the beck and call of momentary fashions and fads," he said.

"Jesus offers us something bigger than the World Cup," Francis said, extending the metaphor. "He offers us the possibility of a fulfilled and fruitful life."

Francis also made reference to the massive protest movements that swept through Brazil in June, applauding the thirst for justice among legions of young Brazilians but also encouraging them to begin with personal transformation.

"I have been closely following the news reports of the many young people who throughout the world, and also here in Brazil, have taken to the streets in order to express their desire for a more just and fraternal society," he said.

"They are young people who want to be protagonists of change. I encourage them, in an orderly, peaceful and responsible way, motivated by the values of the Gospel, to continue overcoming apathy and offering a Christian response to the social and political concerns present in their countries," he said, in what is likely to be taken here as an indirect blessing of the protests.

Yet, Francis added: "Where do we start? What are the criteria for building a more just society?"

In reply, he quoted Mother Teresa, who was once asked what needed to change in the church and answered, "You and I."

Ironically, perhaps his most direct reference to Brazilian realities since arriving in the country six days ago was delivered in Spanish. Until Saturday, the pope had delivered his speeches in Portuguese and offered his ad-lib remarks in Spanish.

In his three speeches Saturday, however, Francis opted to speak in Spanish, affording him a greater liberty to go off the cuff. Brazilian national television provided a voiceover for the pope's remarks, though the crowd on Copacabana beach seemed to understand him perfectly in Spanish, responding loudly when he put questions to them and cheering at other points.

Before Saturday's vigil service got underway, a small counterdemonstration made its way down Rio's Atlantic Avenue alongside Copacabana beach, composed of gay rights activists, advocates for women's issues and secular critics of organized religion. Police kept the small cluster of protestors well away from the World Youth Day pilgrims.

On Sunday, Francis will celebrate an open-air Mass on Copacabana beach expected to draw a crowd of roughly the same magnitude. He'll also address the coordinating committee of the Episocal Conference of Latin America (CELAM) and volunteers of World Youth Day before leaving Rio de Janeiro to return to Rome.

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