News



The statue of Our Lady of Fatima is carried May 13, 2021, at the Marian shrine of Fatima in central Portugal. Thousands of pilgrims attended the 104th anniversary of the first apparition of Mary to three shepherd children. Pope Francis is expected to visit Fatima Aug. 5 as part of World Youth Day events. (OSV News/Reuters/Pedro Nunes)



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At first glance, the Catholic faith today in Portugal seems as central a part of everyday life as when the conservative dictator António de Oliveira Salazar's autocratic regime ruled the country with the tacit approval of the hierarchy in the mid-20th century.

Adults and young children alike still attend traditional festas and participate in religious processions, often carrying aloft life-size flower-adorned statues of Jesus, Mary and Sao Antonio de Lisboa, the 13th-century Portuguese Franciscan friar who is known to most Catholics the world over as St. Anthony of Padua. Priests and bishops are still called upon to bless fishing fleets or new bridges, and the roads into Fatima are often jammed with religious pilgrims.

Even so, when Pope Francis arrives in Lisbon on Aug. 2 for the 42nd international trip of his papacy and his fourth World Youth Day — a major gathering of Catholic youth that takes place in various cities around the globe every few years — he will find a weakened Catholic Church experiencing the same difficulties it has in much of the developed world.



This is the logo for the Aug. 1-6 World Youth Day in Lisbon, Portugal. (CNS/Holy See Press Office)

More than 400,000 young people have registered for the Aug. 1-6 youth jamboree in Lisbon, Portugal — including a delegation from Ukraine and one from Russia — that culminates with a visit by the pope. Pope John Paul II initiated the first World Youth Day in 1986. Although Catholicism's cultural ties run deep in Portugal and participation numbers are boosted by hundreds of pilgrim groups from around the world, numbers can be deceiving: While nearly 80% of Portuguese identify as Catholic, less than 20% attend weekly Mass.

"The greatest challenge to Catholicism [in Portugal] is society's indifferentism," said Fr. Hélio Nuno Soares, a parish priest of the Angra Diocese, who noted that agnosticism has gained ground in Portuguese society as more people disaffiliate from the institutional church.



"The greatest challenge to Catholicism [in Portugal] is society's indifferentism," said Fr. Hélio Nuno Soares, a parish priest of the Angra Diocese in Portugal. (Courtesy of Hélio Nuno Soares)

"Catholicism maintains its preponderance, but is losing influence on the values present in society," Soares told NCR.

But some challenges facing the church have been self-inflicted by a church failing to live out its own values.

In February, an independent commission released a report finding that Catholic clergy members in Portugal had abused more than 4,800 children since 1950. The commission's chairman said that figure was likely "just the tip of the iceberg," and its findings sent shockwaves throughout the country's Catholics.

While the primary aim of World Youth Day is to energize a new generation of young Catholics for the future, Francis will likely be unable to do so without a serious reckoning with the church's past.

Celebratory atmosphere confronts abuse

World Youth Days have long been known to be celebratory occasions — a week of concerts and rambunctious youth festivals, along with daily catechesis and prayer services — but looming large over this event will be how the Portuguese church, and Francis in particular, confronts the sobering reality of abuse.

In June, organizers said the pope would meet with victims of clergy abuse, though the details of the meeting have yet to be made public.



Pedro Strecht, a psychiatrist who heads Portugal's Independent Committee for the Study of Child Abuse in the Catholic Church, attends a news conference in Lisbon Oct. 11, 2022. World Youth Day organizers said Pope Francis would meet with victims of clergy abuse while in Lisbon, though the details of the meeting have yet to be made public. (CNS/Reuters/Pedro Nunes)

Pedro Strecht, who served as the coordinator of the independent commission, said that in less than a year more than 500 people had come forward to share their trauma of abuse.

"The majority of them were still expecting for a clergy's recognition of the abuse and the way it was silenced during decades — a public apology for what happened and a clear promise for a different attitude in the future," said Strecht, who is a child and adolescent psychiatrist.

"Giving voice to the silence," he told NCR, has been the central theme of the commission's work, and what he said will be the task of the pope during his stay in the country.

António Grosso, one of the organizers of Coração Silenciado ("Silenced Heart"), an association founded to support victims and survivors of abuse in the Portuguese Catholic Church, praised the work of the independent commission but said its findings have been glossed over or ignored by a number of prominent prelates and priests in the country who dismissed them as old or historical findings.

Catholics in the pews, he noted, have had a very different reaction and expect abuse to be confronted directly as a central part of the World Youth Day program, not a tangential element.

"Everyone would be very disappointed if Pope Francis did not mention and highlight the question of the abuses and did not make an appeal to everyone in order to provide the necessary support to the victims as well as a strong appeal against forgetfulness," he told NCR.



Young people record the official theme song for the Lisbon 2023 World Youth Day in Torres Vedras, Portugal, in this Aug. 5, 2020, file photo. The official song is titled "Ha Pressa no Ar" (There Is Urgency in the Air). World Youth Day had been postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/World Youth Day Lisbon, Filipe Amorim)

Filipe d'Avillez, a religion reporter in Portugal, characterized the Portuguese bishops' initial response to the commission's findings as a "disaster" that seemed to be rushed in an effort to deal with the issue before the pope arrived in the country.

The pope's message in the country, he told NCR, will have to be directed at both victims and the bishops, if the church is to regain credibility.

For survivors of abuse, said d'Avillez, they must receive "encouragement and assurance that if they step forward and summon the courage to file complaints with diocesan abuse commissions there will be fair and swift action."

And for bishops, he said, the pope must urge transparency, as many dioceses are "going back to their old habits of dealing with these cases as opaquely as they can."

A new message for a new generation

While the country's Catholic hierarchy may have been reticent to use their voice — and resources — to denounce abuse, they haven't hesitated to speak out on a range of cultural and political issues in recent decades.

Their message, it seems, has largely fallen on deaf ears.

Over the last 20 years, over the objections of the nation's Catholic bishops, Portuguese lawmakers and voters have approved laws and referendums liberalizing access to abortion, in vitro fertilization, civil divorce and the legalization of same-sex marriage. In May, the Portuguese parliament decriminalized euthanasia for people with incurable illnesses.

While the bishops regularly issue public guidelines articulating principles of Catholic social teaching for public life, observers say the nation's Catholic leaders are not as influential as they used to be, in part because of the country's recent history.



Pedro Gabriel, a Portuguese physician and novelist who lives in Porto, Portugal, said the country's Catholic bishops are not as outspoken as they once were. (Courtesy of Pedro Gabriel)

"Maybe they could be more outspoken, but I think they choose not to be because they learned from the past and they don't want to repeat the same mistakes as before," said Pedro Gabriel, a Portuguese physician and novelist who lives in Porto.

Gabriel, who also writes on Catholic issues, was referring to the 41-year period when the Catholic Church was the official state religion in Salazar's Portugal. From 1933

until 1974, when a bloodless left-wing military coup toppled Estado Novo, the Catholic Church in Portugal was intertwined with the state, which enshrined Catholic morality in civil law.

"During that very long period, being Catholic was almost identical to being Portuguese," said Ana Paula Ferreira, a professor of Portuguese and Spanish studies at the University of Minnesota.



A World Youth Day pilgrim displays a cross near the Eiffel Tower during the 1997 gathering of Catholic young people in Paris. St. John Paul II was pope, and over 1,200,000 youth from across the world filled the streets of Paris for the event. (CNS file photo by Nancy Wiechec)

Ferreira likened the state of Catholicism in Salazar's Portugal to that in Spain under Gen. Francisco Franco, the fascist dictator who, like Salazar, was ardently anti-Communist and whose regime co-opted the church in a symbiotic relationship.

In Salazar's Portugal, she told NCR, "If one did not at least appear to be Catholic" by attending Mass on Sundays or sending their children to catechism classes, "you were branded a 'Communist.' "

"So we were all Catholic," Ferreira said, "But once the democratic revolution deposed the fascist-colonialist government, there was no longer a political need to appear to be Catholic, so only those who were, indeed, Catholic continued observing the religion."

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The socio-religious developments in Portugal since the 1974 revolution have mirrored the secularizing trends in North America and Europe.

In many respects, combatting those trends was why Pope John Paul II started World Youth Day, a message that was reiterated by Pope Benedict XVI, who also used his messages at World Youth Day to warn against rising tides of secularism and disbelief.

According to a study by the Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, which conducted social research for the 2018 Synod of Bishops on Young People, about 53% of Portuguese young people identified as Catholic, a number higher than the European average.



Pope Francis speaks to young people in a video message released by the Vatican June 22, 40 days before World Youth Day gets underway in Lisbon, Portugal. (CNS screengrab/Courtesy Holy See Press Office)

Despite declining numbers and a church still reeling from abuse, Francis could find fertile ground during his four-night stay in the country, which will also include a day trip to Portugal's popular Fatima shrine on Aug. 5. As Soares described, the main challenge Francis will face is not hostility to the faith, but cutting through deep societal indifference.

And for that reason, the country's Catholics are hoping that the pope — even at 86 and in fragile health — will follow his pattern of direct, personal encounters and giving a fresh face of Catholicism aimed at a new generation.

"He’s a very practical person, not driven by abstract ideologies," Gabriel said. "In that sense, I think he will appeal to the Portuguese people."

Related: World Youth Day helps inspire young people to serve others, pope says
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