Vatican

View from the Vatican



From left: Pope John Paul II celebrates World Youth Day in Toronto in 2002 (CNS); Pope Francis speaks to young people in a video message released June 22, 2023, ahead of World Youth Day in Lisbon, Portugal (CNS screenshot/Courtesy of Holy See Press Office); Pope Benedict XVI arrives to lead a World Youth Day prayer vigil in Madrid in 2011 (CNS/Catholic Press Photo/Alessia Giuliani).



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At a press conference just hours after Pope Francis underwent a surprise hernia operation in June, an immediate concern was whether the 86-year-old would be cleared to travel to Portugal in August for World Youth Day.

When Francis lands in Lisbon on Aug. 2 for the 42nd international trip of his decadelong papacy and for his fourth World Youth Day, he will be demonstrating that, despite serious health setbacks over the last year, he intends to press ahead with his agenda.

But similar to his two most recent predecessors, he will also inevitably have to confront the reality that World Youth Days — major gatherings of Catholic young people from around the globe every few years — test the limits of aging pontiffs.

In 2002, when a frail Pope John Paul II landed at Toronto's Pearson airport for World Youth Day there, he stunned onlookers and his handlers alike by walking down the steps of the plane himself. In the months leading up to the trip, there was much speculation over whether the pope, who had Parkinson's disease, would even be able to make the trip.

The ailing pontiff acknowledged that he was "old" when speaking to young people, but the roar of their chants of "JPII, we love you" managed to reinvigorate the 82-year-old pope and World Youth Day founder.

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After John Paul's arrival in Canada, he spent four days resting on nearby Strawberry Island before officially arriving to take part in World Youth Day festivities — a

strategy repeated by an 81-year-old Pope Benedict XVI when he arrived in Australia for Sydney's World Youth Day in 2008.

Despite their advanced ages and various physical limitations, both popes managed to rise to the occasion, using their World Youth Day appearances not only to energize a new generation of Catholics, but also to rejuvenate themselves.

In Toronto in 2002, John Paul — who at that point in his papacy struggled with speech — managed to deliver the speeches himself, despite plans to have an aide deliver them on the pope's behalf.

At Madrid's 2011 World Youth Day, the then-84-year-old Benedict refused to leave the stage — and the young people present — when a thunderstorm knocked out the electricity and temporarily halted the event. His spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, would later describe that moment as a metaphor for Benedict's entire pontificate.

But World Youth Day also loomed large in Benedict's decision and timing to resign the papacy, knowing that he was physically unable to continue traveling and wanting a new pope to be in place in order to make it to the 2013 World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro.

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At 86, Francis will now be the oldest pope to ever preside over a World Youth Day celebration. Despite his recent surgery and struggles with mobility, his schedule for Lisbon is jam-packed with more events than his past trips over the last year — including a total of 11 speeches over five days and a trip to the country's popular Marian shrine of Fátima.

Francis has repeatedly said that getting out of the Vatican is what gives him life, and with plans to travel to Mongolia at the end of August and to Marseilles, France, at the end of September, it's clear the pope doesn't want to stop traveling.

But since returning to the Vatican following his surgery, he has also shown signs that he's in a hurry. At the beginning of July, he appointed his longtime theological adviser, Archbishop Víctor Manuel Fernández, as the new head of the Vatican's doctrinal office, a move meant to shore up his curial reforms with a renewed

emphasis on pastoral theology.

A week later, he made the surprise announcement that he would create 21 new cardinals in September, further cementing his imprint on the College of Cardinals. And all of this will take place on the eve of the closely watched October Synod of Bishops, which is likely to also be another legacy defining moment for his pontificate.

While the charismatic Francis will undoubtedly be in his element in Lisbon this week as he feeds off the energy of the young people there, it's not hard to imagine that in the back of his mind he might also be wondering whether he will be present at the next World Youth Day — and what all he might want to accomplish before then.

This story appears in the **World Youth Day 2023** feature series. View the full series .