Opinion
NCR Voices



Pope Francis embraces a World Youth Day pilgrim after hearing her confession in Vasco da Gama Garden in Lisbon, Portugal, Aug. 4. The pope administered the sacrament to three pilgrims: young men from Italy and Spain, and the young woman from Guatemala. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Poor George Weigel. He simply can't abide a pope whose first language is not Polish. As final preparations were underway for World Youth Day, he took to the pages of First Things (aka Last Gasps) to whine about a lack of "Christocentrism" in the focus of this year's event. Under John Paul II, World Youth Day was, according to Weigel, about evangelization, and now it is "tiresome psychobabble about walking together into the future."

Pope Francis apparently did not get the memo. The Argentine pope listened to several testimonies before he delivered his own address to university students in Lisbon. He referenced two of those interventions in a passage worth quoting in its entirety:

> Thank you, Tomás, for reminding us that "an authentic integral ecology is not possible without God, that there can be no future in a world without God." In response, I would say: make your faith credible through your decisions. For unless faith gives rise to convincing lifestyles, it will not be a "leaven" in the world. It is not enough for us Christians to be convinced; we must also be convincing. Our actions are called to reflect, joyfully and radically, the beauty of the Gospel. Furthermore, Christianity cannot be lived as a fortress surrounded by high walls, one that raises the ramparts against the world. That is why I was moved by Beatriz's testimony. She said that it is precisely "within the field of culture" that she feels called to live the Beatitudes. In every age, one of the most important tasks for Christians is to recover the meaning of the incarnation. Without the incarnation, Christianity becomes an ideology — and currently there is the temptation towards "Christian ideologies." Whereas the incarnation enables us to be amazed by the beauty of Christ revealed through every brother and sister, every man and woman.

If that is not Christocentric, I do not know what is.

> 'Pope Francis, like John Paul II who is now canonized, energized the youth with reasons to believe in the Gospel way of life in our global highly individualistic and secular culture.'
> —Archbishop Roberto Gonzalez Nieves
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And the pope's words breathe evangelical zeal, real evangelization, not the kind of apologetics for the already converted that is Weigel's stock-in-trade. It is this same confusion of evangelization with apologetics that characterizes what I recently called the "Steubenville approach" to the faith, which will be on exclusive display at next year's National Eucharistic Congress. I do not doubt that there are people for whom that iteration of Catholicism works, but I also know it leaves many people, especially many young people, alienated. And they feel alienated enough already.

Pope Francis, who is a pastor first and last, seems uniquely gifted at reaching out to the alienated. "There is room for everyone in the church and, whenever there is not, then, please, we must make room, including for those who make mistakes, who fall or struggle," he told the young people gathered at the welcoming ceremony at Edward VII Park. "The Lord does not point a finger, but opens wide his arms: Jesus showed us this on the cross. He does not close the door, but invites us to enter; he does not keep us at a distance, but welcomes us."

Again, one asks: Is that not Christocentric? Is that not evangelization? Or does evangelization only count if there are footnotes to the Theology of the Body?

San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy attended that welcoming ceremony. "In these days the faith and striving for faith of the young people of our world has been palpable and overwhelming — in their stories of Christ’s presence in their lives and in their sufferings unfolding in the catechetical sessions, in the confessions of anguished, beautiful souls, and in the continuing testimony to the universality of God’s grace that is manifested in the joyful embraces on the streets and the desires of this generation to protect and ennoble our world," McElroy told me via email. “But it was in the welcoming ceremony, in Pope Francis' profound reflection on the all embracing, loving face of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, that the evangelizing power of this particular gathering crystallized. God’s love is for all of us — todos, todos, todos. This is the call that will mark this world youth day, and its power of outreach and grace."



Pilgrims pray during the welcome ceremony for Pope Francis during World Youth Day at Eduardo VII Park in Lisbon, Portugal, Aug. 3. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

This World Youth Day also featured thousands of young people encountering Christ in the sacrament of confession. On Aug. 4, there was a Via Crucis with young people. Sunday Mass on Aug. 6 brought the gathering to a conclusion.

How can anyone suggest that this year's World Youth Day is not Christocentric?

I loved St. Pope John Paul II. I spent all day in the rain on Boston Common in 1979 waiting for him to celebrate his first Mass in the United States as pope, and I camped out on the National Mall overnight before his final Mass in the United States at the end of that first apostolic voyage to our country. I read his encyclicals with an open heart and warmed to the ardor of his ecclesiological vision. I even understood the need to apply some centripetal clarifications after the Second Vatican Council unleashed such strong centrifugal forces. I have come to understand — how can any honest observer not? — that John Paul II was a terrible judge of character and that

there are few more important qualities in an effective leader than to be a good judge of character. That detracts not a whit from the profundity of his teachings. Still, time marches on.

In our day, for example, the environmental crisis looms so large and our young people are so mindful of it. To them, Pope Francis is a hero. Perhaps the young people Weigel hangs out with have all drunk the neoliberal, Republican Kool-Aid, and cannot renounce their faith in fossil fuels anymore than they can renounce their faith in Christ. If so, they are delusional and should be pitied. If the church — and the political order — do not find meaningful ways to address this existential crisis of our time, young people will rightly conclude we are not morally serious or true followers of him through whom and for whom all was created (Colossians 1:16).

Is that Christocentric enough for you, George?

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World Youth Day was started by Papa Wojtyla and carried on by Papa Ratzinger and Papa Bergoglio. Each imparted a certain tenor to the event. But it is mostly about the young people. I reached out to a friend who has attended every World Youth Day since the 1993 event in Denver, Archbishop Roberto Gonzalez Nieves of San Juan, Puerto Rico, who is in Lisbon with 500 pilgrims from the island. I emailed to ask how it was going and if it was Christocentric as in the past.

"I have been deeply moved by the spirit of piety and prayer of the youth during the activities that I have attended especially during the celebrations of the Eucharists," the archbishop replied. "I have also been moved by the depth of faith and their closeness to Christ reflected in their observations during the dialogues as part of the catechesis."

After the opening ceremony, he "came away with a renewed sense of hope for the future of the Church," Gonzalez continued. "Pope Francis, like John Paul II who is now canonized, energized the youth with reasons to believe in the Gospel way of life in our global highly individualistic and secular culture. This WYD, as the previous ones I have attended since Denver, is fundamentally a living encounter with the Person of Christ as witnessed by the Successor of Peter."

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