

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 19, 2011 at 8:50am

Big Picture at World Youth Day: 'It's the Evangelicals, stupid!'

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Yesterday, Pope Benedict XVI arrived in Madrid for what is officially the 26th edition of World Youth Day, a total which includes off-year events organized, at least in theory, at the diocesan level. Counting just the massive international gatherings headlined by the pope, Madrid is the 12th World Youth Day since John Paul II launched the tradition in Rome in 1985.

Collectively, those gatherings have generated crowds in excess of 15 million people, making World Youth Day the Olympic Games of world religion: The largest regularly held international religious event on the planet.

?World Youth Day? is, of course, one of those charming bits of Catholic vocabulary that endures despite having thoroughly outlived its accuracy. It was a single day back in 1985, but it's morphed into a week-long jamboree composed of pilgrimage and devotion, catechesis, liturgies and the sacraments, and even Lollapalooza-style pop festivals. (The lineup includes ?PriestBand,? an all-priest septet associated with the Emmanuel Community, which only performs at World Youth Days. Where else can you catch seven guys in Roman collars sounding like Bon Jovi while belting out tunes such as ?We Sing for Jesus??)

From a media point of view, the instinct is to look for what's new about a particular World Youth Day, to which the only honest answer is ?not much.? By now, the template is pretty well set; what changes isn't so much the show, but the audience.

That said, there are a few interesting storylines this time around.

For one thing, World Youth Day 2011 comes as the world flirts with financial apocalypse, and Spain's

banking crisis and staggering unemployment rate form one of the front lines. That's generated controversy about the cost of the event, though organizers insist it's being covered through private grants and participant fees rather than public funds. Nevertheless, some 150 groups, including atheists and secular leftists, have organized a protest under the slogan, "Papal visit, not with my taxes!" That could provide a bit of street theater; on Wednesday, media reports indicated that Spanish police had arrested a young Mexican who apparently was planning to launch tear gas against the anti-papal brigades.

For another, this is Benedict XVI's first trip to Spain in what is now clearly a post-Zapatero era. For a decade, socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has done battle with the church on every conceivable front, making him the bogeyman of the European Catholic imagination. Yet weakened by economic implosion and perceptions of corruption, Zapatero has announced he won't stand for a third term and has called elections for November, hinting at a possible reframing of Spain's (and perhaps Europe's) culture wars.

On Monday, I'll offer an overview of whatever news flashes arise. Here, I want to focus on the forest that World Youth Day represents, rather than its individual trees. The big picture is the following: World Youth Day offers the clearest possible proof that the Evangelical movement coursing through Catholicism today is not simply a "top-down" phenomenon, but also a strong "bottom-up" force.

Defining Evangelical Catholicism

"Evangelical Catholicism" is a term being used to capture the Catholic version of a 21st century politics of identity, reflecting the long-term historical transition in the West from Christianity as a culture-shaping majority to Christianity as a subculture, albeit a large and influential one. I define Evangelical Catholicism in terms of three pillars:

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- A strong defense of traditional Catholic identity, meaning attachment to classic markers of Catholic thought (doctrinal orthodoxy) and Catholic practice (liturgical tradition, devotional life, and authority).
- Robust public proclamation of Catholic teaching, with the accent on Catholicism's mission *ad extra*, transforming the culture in light of the Gospel, rather than *ad intra*, on internal church reform.
- Faith seen as a matter of personal choice rather than cultural inheritance, which among other things implies that in a highly secular culture, Catholic identity can never be taken for granted. It always has to be proven, defended, and made manifest.

I consciously use the term "Evangelical" to capture all this rather than "conservative," even though I recognize that many people experience what I've just sketched as a conservative impulse. Fundamentally, however, it's about something else: the hunger for identity in a fragmented world.

Historically speaking, Evangelical Catholicism isn't really "conservative," because there's precious little cultural Catholicism these days left to conserve. For the same reason, it's not traditionalist, even though it places a premium upon tradition. If liberals want to dialogue with post-modernity, Evangelicals want to convert it — but neither seeks a return to a *status quo ante*. Many Evangelical Catholics actually welcome secularization, because it forces religion to be a conscious choice rather than a passive inheritance. As the late Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger of Paris, the dictionary definition of an Evangelical Catholic, once put it, "We're really at the dawn of Christianity."

Paradoxically, this eagerness to pitch orthodox Catholicism as the most satisfying entrée on the post-modern spiritual smorgasbord, using the tools and tactics of a media-saturated global village, makes Evangelical Catholicism both traditional and contemporary all at once.

Evangelical from the Bottom Up

‘Evangelical Catholicism’ has been the dominant force at the policy-setting level of the Catholic church since the election of Pope John Paul II in 1978. If you want to understand Catholic officialdom today -- why decisions are being made the way they are in the Vatican, or in the U.S. bishops’ conference, or in an ever-increasing number of dioceses -- this is easily the most important trend to wrap your mind around.

You’ll get Evangelical Catholicism badly wrong, however, if you think of it exclusively as a top-down movement. There’s also a strong bottom-up component, which is most palpable among a certain segment of the younger Catholic population.

We’re not talking about the broad mass of twenty- and thirty-something Catholics, who are all over the map in terms of beliefs and values. Instead, we’re talking about that inner core of actively practicing young Catholics who are most likely to discern a vocation to the priesthood or religious life, most likely to enroll in graduate programs of theology, and most likely to pursue a career in the church as a lay person -- youth ministers, parish life coordinators, liturgical ministers, diocesan officials, and so on. In that sub-segment of today’s younger Catholic population, there’s an Evangelical energy so thick you can cut it with a knife.

Needless to say, the groups I’ve just described constitute the church’s future leadership.

Once upon a time, the idea that the younger generation of intensely committed Catholics was more ‘conservative’ belonged to the realm of anecdotal impressions. By now, it’s an iron-clad empirical certainty.

Case in point: A 2009 study carried out by Georgetown’s Center of Applied Research in the Apostolate, and sponsored by the National Religious Vocations Conference, found a marked contrast between new members of religious orders in the United States today (the ‘millennial generation’) and the old guard. In general, younger religious, both men and women, are more likely to prize fidelity to the church and to pick a religious order on the basis of its reputation for fidelity; they’re more interested in wearing the habit, and in traditional modes of spiritual and liturgical expression; and they’re much more positively inclined toward authority.

To gauge which way the winds are blowing, consider women’s orders. The study found that among those which belong to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, considered the more ‘liberal’ umbrella group, just one percent have at least ten new members; among those which belong to the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, seen as the more ‘conservative’ group, a robust 28 percent have at least ten new members.

For the most part, it’s a mistake to diagnose this trend in ideological terms, as if it’s about the politics of left vs. right. For today’s younger Catholics, it’s more a matter of generational experience. They didn’t grow up in a stuffy, all-controlling church, so they’re not rebelling against it. Instead, they’re rebelling against a rootless secular world, making them eager to embrace clear markers of identity and sources of meaning.

Among youth, Evangelical Catholicism usually becomes ideological only if the older generation paints

them into a corner, demanding that they choose sides in the church's internal battles. That tendency, alas, seems equally pronounced on the left and the right.

Evangelical Catholicism and World Youth Day

For sure, not all the youth gathered in Madrid this week are Evangelicals. I've covered five World Youth Days, and it's my observation that you can generally identify three groups: A gung-ho inner core; a more lukewarm cohort, who don't think about religion all that much, but who still go to Mass and see the faith as a positive thing; and those who are just along for the ride, perhaps because their parents would pay for WYD but not spring break in Cabo. (These are usually the kids outside playing hacky-sack and eating ice cream during the catechetical sessions.)

Pastorally, I've always thought the aim was to nudge a few young people from that second group into the first, and from the third group into the second.

That said, the Evangelicals clearly set the tone. World Youth Day is perhaps the lone international venue where being faithfully, energetically Catholic amounts to the "hip" choice of lifestyle. To be clear, this passion isn't artificially manufactured by party ideologues and foisted on impressionable youth, like the Nuremberg rallies or Mao's Red Guard brigades; it's something these young believers already feel, and WYD simply provides an outlet.

In that sense, World Youth Day is the premier reminder of a fundamental truth about Catholicism in the early 21st century. Given the double whammy of Evangelical Catholicism as both the *idée fixe* of the church's leadership class, and a driving force among the inner core of younger believers, it's destined to shape the culture of the church (especially in the global north, i.e., Europe and the United States) for the foreseeable future. One can debate its merits, but not its staying power.

In the real world, the contest for the Catholic future is therefore not between the Evangelicals and some other group -- say, liberal reformers. It's inside the Evangelical movement, between an open and optimistic wing committed to "Affirmative Orthodoxy," i.e., emphasizing what the church affirms rather than what it condemns, and a more defensive cohort committed to waging cultural war. How that tension shakes out among today's crop of church leaders will be interesting to follow, but perhaps even more decisive will be which instinct prevails among the hundreds of thousands of young Catholics in Spain this week, and the Evangelical generation they represent.

That's the big picture in Madrid, whatever the individual brush strokes end up looking like.

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