

The congress for new movements

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 10, 2006 All Things Catholic

Tomorrow, the first massive gathering in St. Peter's Square since Benedict XVI's inaugural Mass one year ago will bring together an estimated 300,000 members of the "new movements," groups of Catholic laity such as the Focolare, the Neocatechumenate, L'Arche, Sant'Egidio, Communion and Liberation, Schönstatt, the Charismatic Renewal and Regnum Christi, which have largely developed in the 20th century. Some 300 representatives of more than 100 movements and new communities are taking part in a congress outside Rome May 31-June 2, leading to the June 3 encounter in the square with the pope.

The event is an echo of the gathering of the new movements with John Paul II in 1998, also held on the Feast of Pentecost.

At a Vatican press conference on Tuesday, Archbishop Stanislaw Rylko, President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, suggested that the movements are a perfect illustration of Benedict's suggestion, borrowed from the historian Arnold Toynbee, that in a relativistic world convinced Christians represent a "creative minority."

Bishop Josef Clemens, secretary of the Council for the Laity and erstwhile private secretary of Benedict XVI, said that roughly 1,400 of the expected crowd of 300,000 would be from North America, principally the United States. Guzmán Carriquiry, under-secretary of the council, said that most of those 1,400 Americans will be drawn from the world of the Charismatic Renewal and Cursillo, with small pockets from other movements.

Over the years, some bishops and diocesan personnel have complained that the movements tend to pursue their own agendas rather than the common good of the church. Benedict XVI's general support does not mean he is indifferent to such concerns. In his message to the congress, which was released June 1, Benedict said, "The church thanks you for the openness you demonstrate in welcoming the operative indications not only of the Successor of Peter, but also of the bishops in the different local churches, who, together with the pope, are the custodians of the truth and of charity in unity."

"Every problem has to be confronted by the movements with sentiments of profound communion, in a spirit of adhesion to the legitimate pastors," he said.

Asked at the press conference about these tensions, Rylko said that he "wouldn't be pessimistic."

"We see a notable increase in the number of bishops who come to us during their *ad limina* visits, from all continents, convinced that the new movements are a gift to be received with gratitude and responsibility," he said.

"Both pastors and the movements must allow themselves to be purified and educated by the Holy Spirit," Rylko said.

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One footnote to Rylko's reference to the movements as an example of what Benedict XVI means by a "creative minority." While Rylko's point is valid, there's a risk in circumscribing Benedict's now-famous invocation of Toynbee a bit too narrowly.

In making this reference, the pope had in mind not so much specific groups such as Communion and Liberation or the Focolare, which meet the classic sociological profile of a minority. He really meant a certain kind of Christian psychology, which doesn't rely on the broader culture or on any of the normal social subgroups (family, school, neighborhood) to foster Christian living. Instead, a "creative minority" Christian sees the faith as an intentional, deeply personal choice that has to be preserved and deepened every day in the midst of a culture either indifferent or hostile to religious belief. Christianity has to be chosen and has to be confirmed every day, on purpose, and support systems (what Benedict calls "islands of spiritual composure") likewise have to be intentionally chosen and constructed.

It is precisely from the passion that such a deeply personal commitment requires, Benedict believes, that this "minority" becomes "creative." Despite the small numbers willing to make such a choice, the pope believes, they will have a disproportionate impact on the culture because people will look on and think, "The future belongs to them."

In this sense, it would be a mistake to think that Benedict believes the movements are the only, or even the primary, way for Christians to function as a "creative minority." Quite the contrary; it's a disposition to which all Christians are called, with the movements as only one, and perhaps not the best, example.

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