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Elements of continuity and progressive innovations in the history of World Youth Day

The first World Youth Day took place more than 30 years ago. The history of this event has its deeply-rooted traditions as well as its innovations. Then, how to describe the relationship between these two aspects? What is the outcome produced by this particular combination? This is the purpose of this presentation that focuses on a basic idea that crossed my mind just before coming to Cracow to take part in this international congress.

On the morning of my departure, as I walked into the Fiumicino Airport in Rome, I realized that I had forgotten my passport at home. The possibility of missing my flight was very high. I was looking around me hopelessly, when I noticed an exhibition at the Alitalia stand. The title of the exhibition organized by the Polish artist Anna Gulak was *The Faces of John Paul II*. As if enlightened by a higher inspiration, I called a friend who is a taxi-driver, asking him to go to my home, get my passport and bring it to me to the airport.

That episode was still on my mind and was thinking about the idea of a passport until I realized that I had found something more than a solution for my flight to Cracow: I found the key to understanding that I was missing a decisive and unifying element.

Are World Youth Day like a passport?

World Youth Day have been like a passport that allows young people to get back on board of St. Peter's boat, i.e. the Church, and the Church to get through that invisible but solid barrier of separation, that gate – to use the airport terminology – that used to keep Herself away from the young.

Moreover, the metaphor of the passport embodies quite well the two aspects – the elements of continuity and progressive innovations – that are the foundation of my speech that now I would like to deliver.

In fact, a passport gives information about someone's identity. That identity does not change over time – here is the continuity. On contrary, the facial features, the hair color and the age change. For these reasons it is necessary from time to time to renew the passport to make it more accurate and up-to-date.

This has been happening for the last thirty years, also because of that particular passport called WYDs. On the one hand, its identity – very clear since the beginning – has never failed. Indeed, it has been gradually strengthened. On the other however, the features have been progressively changed, the face and the age have adapted to that independent variable which we call “time.” The structure of World Youth Day ended up by assuming the features of a progressive maturity. However, in the exchange between the fundamental continuity and changes, in my opinion, the continuity prevailed in one more aspect. The basic identity printed in the WYD passport by the authority that first released it – Saint John Paul II – is still strong and clear. It is the identity that focuses mainly on the trinomial **vocation, education and mission**. But there have also been a lot of changes.

Elements of continuity

In terms of the identity, we can say that Pope Wojtyła opened a new path that until then just a few had been brave enough to follow. Indeed, many people considered that path impassable: John Paul II proved that you can and must talk about Christ with young people.

Here is **vocation**. St. John Paul II called young people and young people answered. For what purpose did they answer? Do you remember that famous sentence from one of the most famous addresses in the history of WYDs? “Who have you come here to find?” He pronounced these words in Rome in 2000, but the whole history of World Youth Day is as though it was impregnated and thus fertilized by it. From the very beginning, Pope Wojtyła gathered young people not around him (although his influence on them is undeniable) but around the Crucified and Risen Christ.

Here is **education**. The education moves in the gift of the Cross which then will become the symbol of WYDs. Here is the cross, peregrinating around the world during WYDs, almost like a plough that reawakens prolific energies everywhere it goes, that stirs the soil of certain pastoral apathies and prepares the young to the sowing of the Word by the pope. Here, eventually, are the catecheses that are an essential part of WYDs.

In the end, here is **mission**. World Youth Day have become perhaps the greatest, longest-lasting and most effective missionary event of our times. A mission carried out by young people for other young people, a mission for the Church Herself. As Cardinal Stanisław Ryłko reminded me yesterday, if it is true what John Paul II said to a bishop after Santiago de Compostela WYD in 1989: “We didn’t evangelize young people, they have evangelized us.”

Can you notice, in this regard, an analogy with what Pope Francis saying nowadays about the ability to evangelize demonstrated by the poor? Young people evangelized the Church at the end of the 20th century. The poor have been evangelizing Her since the beginning of the 21st century. And the analogy does not end here, because thirty years ago, at the beginning of the history of WYDs, young people could consider themselves as “the poor.” In many cases, this was not economic but certainly no less serious poverty.

Progressive innovations

Here we can start analyzing the elements which are changing continuously in our particular passport. I mean all the realities that require a “renewal”

over time. I feel I must address it and say something about the young generation, that in my book about the history of WYDs I called “the WYD Generation.” To tell the truth, this large group of young people includes at least three generations, those who have attended WYDs from the mid-80s to nowadays.

The first generation that John Paul II rallied, challenging – as I mentioned before – the skepticism of many people, formed itself during 1968 and was “imbued” with Marxism. It was full of ideals but perhaps poor in genuine and authentic faith.

The second one began its adventure with WYDs while the Berlin Wall was falling down. Therefore, it was surely more attentive to the spiritual dimension, since those young people could benefit from the great lesson of John Paul II, but at the same time, were more vulnerable to the hidden dangers of practical materialism, agnosticism and relativism. Not by chance, relativism has been defined by Pope Wojtyła and later on by Pope Benedict XVI as a “dictatorship.”

In the end, the third generation is the one that gathers around Pope Francis – the “digital generation” that can easily live both in the real and the virtual world but sometimes is inclined to lose the boundaries. Some news is a dramatic evidence of that.

These discontinuities are not insignificant. The added value of WYD consists in having withstood the generational changes by virtue of an extraordinary ability of adjustment to the changing times, probably due to that fundamental preparation that John Paul II summarized in the following words: “All young people should feel like the Church is taking care of them. Therefore, the whole Church, in union with the Successor of Peter, must feel more committed worldwide, in favor of youth, of its anxieties and its needs, of its openness and hopes, in order to fulfill their expectations, communicating the certainty, that is Christ, the truth which is Christ, the love that is Christ, through an appropriate education.”

In these words we can find, as Cardinal Stanisław Ryłko, the President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, wrote, “the original nucleus of the pastoral project of World Youth Day.” That project, as Fr. Michele Falabretti (the leader of the National Service for Youth Pastoral of the Italian Episcopal Conference) points out, consists in a strong experience

of the universal Church, a meeting around the Cross of Christ and the pope, sharing it with many young people from all over the world.”

Looking at them in the light, it is impossible not to find in these statements the fundamental elements of every WYD:

- ▶ Catecheses that developed in the present form during three meetings (between WYD in Santiago in 1989 and WYD in Częstochowa in 1991) with bishops from respective countries;
- ▶ The Way of the Cross;
- ▶ The outdoor vigil; and
- ▶ The concluding Mass with the missionary mandate (the last three elements have been present since the first WYD).

At the same time, other more variable elements of the program, adapted to the changing times, have been born from the same inspiration:

- ▶ Dedicated location for confession (since Rome 2000);
- ▶ The Youth Festival – cultural events, already present in a spontaneous form in Buenos Aires in 1987 and in Santiago in 1989, and in an official form since Paris 1997 onwards;
- ▶ An art exhibition prepared in collaboration with the Vatican Museums (a kind of the fourth visual “catechesis” since Denver 1993 onwards);
- ▶ Eucharistic adoration (since Cologne 2005 onwards);
- ▶ Pilgrimages undertaken on special occasions, e.g. crossing the threshold of the Holy Door in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome in 2000; passing by the tomb of the Three Kings and seeing the majestic Gothic cathedral in Cologne in 2005; and reaching the Shrine of the Divine Mercy of St. Faustina Kowalska and the St. John Paul II “Be Not Afraid” Center in Cracow this year;
- ▶ Twinning between dioceses, tried out for the first time during EurHope 1995, a meeting of European young people that took place in Loreto and then became a permanent part of the history of World Youth Day since Paris 1997 onwards;
- ▶ Online interactive catecheses (since Sydney 2008 onwards) to allow at least for minimum participation of those who had, for some reasons, to stay at home and could not take part in the event; and
- ▶ The Vocation Center, started in Madrid 2011.

All of this reminds us of a single precious score performed differently, yet equally intensely, by great conductors (the three popes of WYDs: John Paul II, Benedict XVI and now Francis) and excellent performers (bishops, priests and, in particular, young people themselves). That single score had and still has the trinomial dominant notes: **vocation, education and mission** even if it has had several variations of the main theme. A good example is how the spiritual imprint, already visible in World Youth Day of John Paul II, matured with Benedict XVI by adding Eucharistic adoration during the vigil. Or let us think about the itinerary, based on the Beatitudes, with which Francis has been accompanying the young from Rio de Janeiro 2013 to Cracow 2016. Each WYD is not a separated event. It is a strong moment, more and more connected with the way the Church works and with youth pastoral ministry, in particular. The increased intensity and quality of the attendance (apart from the number of participants) we owe to constant maturation of the relationship between elements of continuity and moments of essential innovation that we quickly recall. But this is not enough. There is still a lot of work to do. It should be true for everyone what Renato Boccardo, the current Archbishop of Spoleto-Norcia, said a few years ago (when he worked in the Pontifical Council for the Laity): “Even if we talk about five million participants, as in Manila, we still talk about a minority of young people. We cannot be overjoyed because of the numbers and the sea of people. The missionary dimension must push us to think persistently about ‘the others’, those that did not come. We must think about what we have to do for them, with urgency, creativity and dedication.”

Third phase

Surely, there is no lack of urgency, creativity and dedication between Pope Francis and young people. Given his presence at the Cracow WYD, we could rather say that this is the year of two World Youth Days, if we also include the Jubilee of Mercy for Young People, celebrated in Rome and dioceses around the world from 23rd to 25th April. That event began the third phase in the history of World Youth Day, the phase related to

the digital generation. It is high time for another “renewal” of our passport, once again in the name of both continuity and innovation.

Let us take as an example the Jubilee of Mercy for Young People. On that occasion, the pope’s ability to get along also with the very young became blatant. How to forget his “technological catechesis,” taken from the language of smartphone uses (which the young have mastered very well): “Keep in mind that if there is not Jesus in your life, then it is like when there is no signal,” he said. It is not superfluous to highlight that thanks to the attention given to teenagers (it was the first time that a jubilee was dedicated to them) this target audience, which for many reasons – age, distance, understandable worries of their parents – was very likely to end up in the fringes of the history of the pastoral ministry – was put again in the foreground. Today, in the period when young people leave Church after their confirmation, this is a very strong message, not only for teenagers but also for educators and families.

As always, thanks to Pope Bergoglio, what was in the suburbs has been put back into the center. More generally, we can say that in the relationship with new generations, he involved his ability of keeping different registers together. Indeed, he has been able **to give totally himself** to a joyful encounter with young people. (In this respect, have a look at the pictures taken in Copacabana in 2013 that recall an analogous charisma of John Paul II). At the same time, he introduced into WYDs the dynamics of the spiritual retreats, meaning a deep encounter with Christ that changes one’s life (in this case, following the lesson given by Benedict XVI). But above all, according to Fr. Falabretti, “his originality seems to consist in addressing also educators, to whom the pope basically gives homework. ‘Between one WYD and the other, do not leave young people (and very young) alone. Stay always close to them.’” We could say that only this way WYDs can happen every day, not just once every three years.