

EVENTIZATION OF FAITH AS A MARKETING STRATEGY: WORLD YOUTH DAY AS AN INNOVATIVE RESPONSE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH TO PLURALIZATION¹

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1. Introduction

For some time now, marketing experts have been discussing the potential of the event as an instrument for re-establishing a rapport with customers. Exponents argue that eventization works (Schulze, 1992) because it transforms a product into a spectacle that appeals to all the senses and stages it in a “cultural world of experience” (Hitzler, 2002, p. 202).

As a result of pluralization and (in Western Europe at least) secularization, the churches find themselves in a precarious situation. Hence it is not surprising that the Catholic Church, which has always been open to new social forms, has adopted eventization as a strategy for marketing its faith product. After all, private companies are by no means the only ones to employ this marketing

1. This article is a slightly revised version of an article of the same name that appeared in *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sektor Marketing*. Special Issue : Marketing and Religion, November 2010, Vol. 15, Issue 4, p. 382-394.

strategy (Betz *et al.*, 2011). For quite some time now, cities, local authorities and nonprofit organizations have been making increasing use of events as a “platform for corporate communication” (Bruhn, 1997, p. 777; cf. also Buss, 2004). And in view of the precarious situation in which the churches in Germany find themselves, reservations towards marketing are obviously fading in church circles, too (cf. Tscheulin and Dietrich, 2003). Indeed, the Corpus Christi processions, which have been part of the Catholic tradition for centuries, are considered by many to display a number of event-like features (Ebertz, 2000; Ruster, 2006, p. 7ff). Moreover, according to Knoblauch (2000a), the Papal Masses developed during the Pontificate of John Paul II also attest to the pro-active handling of event forms on the part of the Catholic Church. Therefore it is not too far-fetched to describe the Catholic Church as the “mother of all event agencies” (Gerhards, 2002, p. 86). In the case of World Youth Day (WYD), the Catholic Church appears to be availing of the concept of eventization even more resolutely. WYD took place for the first time in 1985 and has since been staged every two years in a major world city in a way that attracts considerable public and media attention. The present article examines the specific characteristics of this event and the strategy pursued by the organizers.

2. Research question

World Youth Day 2005 (WYD05) in Cologne was the subject of a research project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and conducted by a research consortium made up of four German universities. The parent project comprised three sub-projects. First, a sociological project based at the Universities of Trier and Koblenz that analyzed the expectations and experiences of the predominantly young pilgrims who attended WYD05 (cf. Forschungskonsortium WJT, 2007). Second, a communication-studies project based at the University of Bremen that dealt with the coverage of WYD05 in the religious and secular media (Hepp and Kroenert, 2009). And third, a sociological project based at the University of Dortmund on which the present author worked. The Dortmund pro-