

## Musicians play "Papalpalooza" for Benedict

By Deborah Evans Price

NASHVILLE (Billboard) - In a convergence of religious experience and rock festival, some of the top acts in Christian music will perform at a youth rally on Saturday as part of Pope Benedict XVI's U.S. visit.

Third Day, Matt Maher, Salvador and tobyMac are scheduled to perform in Yonkers, N.Y., at St. Joseph Seminary. Inaugural "American Idol" champion Kelly Clarkson was also slated.

"St. Joseph is a beautiful, historic seminary campus -- one of the most important seminaries in the country," says event producer Chris Wangro, president of New York-based Zaragunda.

"We've been building here for over a week. It's a giant setup -- it's a reconfigured stage once used for the Rolling Stones. The site is about 50 acres, and we've covered every inch of it with production needs. We're calling it 'Papalpalooza.' "

Wangro says "miles and miles" of temporary fencing have been put up. "We've put in an entire food operation. We have over 600 people working," he says. "We expect 25,000-30,000 people to be coming. We've set up temporary chapel tents. We've set up confessional areas, emergency medical and the whole nine yards. It's a real festival. That's what makes this different from the other papal events."

Wangro was previously director of special events for the city of New York and handled events for its parks department. "When Pope John Paul came into New York City in 1995, the folks from the archdiocese brought me in to run operations for the Central Park mass," he says. "And now with Pope Benedict coming, they asked me to produce this portion of the pope's visit in Yonkers."

According to Wangro, the New York Archdiocese is paying the production costs -- which he declines to specify -- and all acts are performing gratis. "Not only are people volunteering (to perform), people are paying their own expenses to come to town," Wangro says. "It is the pope, after all."

Obviously the pope is the primary draw, but the artists also are happy to be performing at an event that targets youth. "It's an opportunity for the country to see there is a young Catholic Church and they are passionate about what they believe," says Maher, who is Catholic. "It's a chance for them to look around and say, 'I'm not alone in my convictions. I'm not alone in my beliefs.'"

"We have everything from great children's choirs and dance troupes to some of the greatest acts in Christian rock," Wangro says. "It's all about the spirit of the day that can be shared whether you're a kid in a garage band or a Grammy-winning artist like Third Day. We are bringing together a wide spectrum of people united by their faith."

Maher has prior experience with papal events, having performed during the pope's 1999 visit to St. Louis. Maher also works regularly with two national Catholic ministries: Life Teen, a worldwide Catholic youth ministry, and Louisiana-based Adore Ministries. He is scheduled to perform at World Youth Day in July in Sydney, and says the St. Joseph event has special meaning for him.

"There are people coming from different denominational backgrounds," says Maher, whose Essential Records label debut, "Empty & Beautiful," came out earlier this month. "To me it affirms the work the pope is trying to do for the gospel around the world."

Reuters/Hollywood Reporter

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