

3-4-08 – WHAT SIGNAL DOES THE POPE BRING TO NEW YORK?

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<http://harryjbyrne.blogspot.com/2008/03/what-signal-does-pope-bring-to-new-york.html>

Benedict XVI will address the United Nations in New York on April 19. On the next day, he will celebrate Mass at the Yankee Stadium. Security will be tight. Tickets have been made available through the parishes and admission will be carefully controlled. All is not easy. Ticket holders must arrive very early and use transportation provided by the archdiocese.

What appeal the pope will have remains to be seen. Parishes in the poorer sections of the city report a rush for tickets. In more affluent sections, the attraction is noticeably diminished.

There is also some static in the airwaves. The pope's advance people have indicated that no lay eucharistic ministers will be in service. What is more startling is that ordained deacons have not been invited to participate. Only priests will distribute Holy Communion. Appeals have gone out to enlist 500 priests for this purpose. This may prove unrealistic, given that the Mass is on a Sunday. Priests, already in short supply, as the Vatican would be expected to know, will be needed in their own parishes for Sunday Masses. More than a little discomfort has been reported among deacons because they have not been invited to participate in one of the ways for which they have been trained and ordained.

Further ruffled feelings have resulted from an invitation from Mayor Michael Bloomberg to Benedict to a reception at Gracie Mansion, official residence of the mayor. Also invited were leading representative Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim clergy. When the pope's advance men indicated to the mayor that Benedict would prefer to be the sole religious figure, the invitation was withdrawn.

This lack of ecumenical feeling and the exclusion of deacons and lay ministers from distribution of the Eucharist at this papal Mass contributes to an uneasy feeling in some quarters that Benedict and his predecessor, John Paul II, have not been straight forward in being publicly enthusiastic about Vatican II, while quietly trying to slip the gears into reverse.

Other restrictions have been placed on lay ministers of the Eucharist. They are not to be used, when priests are available. They no longer may remove and replace the ciborium in the tabernacle. Benedict XVI has given a new lease on life to the Tridentine Latin Mass. In January of this year, Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith, Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, has written that receiving Holy Communion in the hand must be revisited and revised in favor of receiving on the tongue.

Do not these and other signs of Rome's tendency towards an intensifying clericalism add to the polarity of views within the Church? With Rome ready to enter into dialogue with various branches of Protestantism and the Jewish community, would it not be helpful, if not mandatory, for the hierarchy to enter into dialogue with those Catholics who are put off by the lack of transparency in hierarchical management and the practical exclusion of the laity from roles already accorded them by canon law in the way of parish and diocesan pastoral and financial councils, so frequently existing as images without content?

Exchanging ideas officially with those outside the Church is accepted by the hierarchy; but to exchange ideas officially with those within the Church as, e.g., the Voice of the Faithful, Call for Action, We are Church, etc., is not only not accepted, but positively rejected. "You can have no meetings on Church property!" Are these Catholic persons regarded by hierarchy as excluded from dialogue? Since they are already Catholics, should they simply sit quietly and listen attentively to their bishops, meanwhile burying any questions that might enter their inquisitive minds?

Does such a hierarchical attitude strengthen or diminish the feeling of fellowship and community? Does it encourage or dissuade membership in the Church?

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life recently reported that more than 25% of adult Americans have left the faith of their childhood to join another religion or no religion. Its survey purports to show that 3% of all Protestants and 8% of Catholics have made the change. About one third of respondents raised Catholic said they no longer identified as such. This is said to mean that 10% of all Americans are former Catholics; that the percentage of Catholics in the US population has held steady for decades at about 25 % but that this masks a precipitous decline in native born Catholics; that the proportion is bolstered by the large influx of Catholic immigrants, mostly from Latin America; and that the RC Church has lost more adherents than any other group.

These startling figures constitute a challenge to sociology departments of Catholic universities to explore reasons for these changes and a challenge to the hierarchy to be more open to these experience-based studies rather than reliance on absolute concepts of clericalism, which assure the maintenance of power and control in the hands of those now possessing them.

It is not just a nostalgia for the past that is behind this dynamic, exemplified by what JP II has done and B16 is doing to maintain the closed cocoon of clericalism. It appears to many simply as efforts to maintain power and control.

Why, many ask, must a celebration of a Mass and connecting to Jesus through the sacraments always involve an obeisance to Rome in the most minute details, like keeping thumb and forefinger closed together after handling the Blessed Sacrament? Why must Rome insist, as it did in the 1998 Synod for Asia, on having translations of liturgical books into Japanese be carried out in Rome, rather than in Japan under the Japanese bishops as they strongly requested?

Why is celibacy for priesthood insisted upon by Rome, when it, realistically viewed, excludes most heterosexual young modern men, other than for the control it gives over the priest. To control one's sexual life, controls his private life, his public life, his residence, his income, his retirement ,and, should an allegation of abuse of a minor be lodged, he faces one person in the role of arresting officer, prosecutor, judge, appellant bench, and parole officer - his bishop!

This passion for centralized control and its failure to recognize and accept the conscience, the prudence, the spontaneity, and the intelligence of the individual Catholic and of the local churches may well be a factor in the departure of so many Catholics from the faith in which they were born and raised. Professor Stephen Prothero of Boston U. observed regarding the Pew Report that "The trend is towards more personal religion and evangelists offer that. Those losing out are offering impersonal religion and those winning are offering a smaller scale".

On a minor matter, I find it jarring, when praying the breviary, to find after a psalm or prayer, "And here is not recited the Gloria..." and also to do gymnastics with the book if you followed the directions for days in ordinary time, major feasts of Jesus, or of the Common of Several Martyrs, individual feast days of saints, and on and on. There are of course reasons for these circuitous routes, but authoritative directions from headquarters, perhaps necessary in a way, seem to involve a genuflection to Rome before one prays or offers Mass. How valuable is the law from Rome that a priest pray the breviary every day, when it produced the phenomenon years ago of priests clustering around the headlights of cars, reading the psalms in Latin to finish by midnight, by standard time or the hour according to the local longitude reading? We must be challenged to more than that!

This blog posting was suggested by the scheduled visit to NY of Benedict XVI. Its point: to show how it may have disappointed deacons, male and female Eucharistic ministers, Mayor Bloomberg, and perhaps others, and how authority, seeking inexorably to centralize and to augment discipline and control, may defeat the spread of the Gospel of Jesus that is its mission.