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Pope risks becoming ëDali Lama in papal dressí

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For its exceptional character, and for the words it contains, the letter of Benedict XVI to Catholic bishops reveals much more than the personal anguish of a pope who, with regard to the Williamson affair, has been attacked and harassed by his own, and who sees how even in the church ? for that matter, even in the Vatican itself, as the editor of L?Osservatore Romano has made clear ? people ?bite and devour one another? (Galatians 5:13-15).

The letter and its contents betray feelings of anxiety and disappointment which, in reality, bring something much more important into view: a basic crisis of authority that today is felt at the very top of the church.

Contradictions accumulated over the last half-century are coming to a head with regard to the role of the pope, which has undergone a profound historical transformation. That transformation has two principal causes, with which popes have had to come to terms: the advent of television, and the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

The advent of television meant the virtual transformation of the pope from the head of the Church of Rome into a figure on the global stage, held hostage on a daily basis by global public opinion ? which, for the most part, is non-Catholic, and, for that matter, non-Christian. Held hostage, that is, by the media, which is both the servant and the master of public opinion.

Pope John XXIII, elected at the end of the 1950s, coinciding with the planetary spread of TV, was the first pope able to exploit the obvious opportunities created by this transition: to become a universal ethical-charismatic leader, in a certain sense ?meta-religious.? (He was dubbed ?the good pope,? almost as if his predecessors were ?bad?; but in a sense, that?s how they were indirectly made to appear by the power of the media, and therefore, that?s what they became.)

Naturally, this relationship with global public opinion and with the media represents, for the pope, a bond of no little importance ? especially because it?s a bond with no essentially religious nature, or for that matter spiritual. Yet it significantly influences the popularity of the pope even in the Catholic world, since the media always presents itself as an interested party in the church?s internal differences ? never failing, among other things, to define and emphasize those differences in the most ideologically banal fashion possible.

The pope is thus at risk of becoming a prisoner: On the one hand, a prisoner of the obligations of charisma, of ?coming off well? on TV, of having a good public image, of being ?nice?; and, on the other hand, a prisoner of political correctness, conformity to which is a requirement for the media?s approval. In sum, the risk is of

becoming a sort of Dali Lama in papal dress.

The second transformation, equally full of tension for the institutional role of the pope, was triggered by the council. In practice, Vatican II meant the birth of ?political parties? inside the church. To be clear, there have always been parties within the Vatican; but that meant parties at the top of the organization, with all its stealthy caution. There weren?t parties among the faithful, in the Catholic world in general.

Beginning with Vatican II, and even inside the council itself ? driven by its documents and its ?spirit? ? the Catholic world split into two great factions: the cautious and the radicals. For the last forty years, these two have fought one another openly and incessantly, each with its own leaders and its more or less formal representatives, and each with sympathizers in the Vatican. Now, however, these two parties ? being able to count upon an effective contingent of what we might call ?followers? ? have become much more combative, and thus much more rigid and insidious, than in the past. Things have come to the point that these parties sometimes openly oppose the authority of the pope himself, or work against him behind the scenes, when he favors the rival party in a given case.

Now we can clearly see the contradictory situation history has created. In reality, the pope today only has one weapon for overcoming the hostility of the Catholic party that opposes him in any given moment, in order to defend his authority as an absolute sovereign: the weapon of his charismatic media appeal, the weapon of ?meta-religious? support on the planetary level, of his words and gestures which come through the screen of CNN and end up on the front page of the New York Times.

In wielding that weapon, however, he risks losing something essential that has historically been part of his role: Spiritual independence. That independence, of course, is no guarantee of avoiding mistakes ? including, for sure, some highly lamentable mistakes ? but at least it preserves the possibility that the pope can say something different from the spirit of the times.

One thing seems certain: In the demanding quest to preserve the pope?s liberty, trapped between political parties and media-driven public opinion ? these two typical creatures of modernity ? Benedict XVI appears painfully, irrevocably alone.

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