

Obama winner on pope, president envy scale

Ken Briggs | Jun. 29, 2009



Analysis

A lot has happened in papal politics since Henry IV, the Holy Roman Emperor, stood barefoot and hatless at the gates of Canossa castle begging pardon from Pope Gregory VII. That was 932 years ago while popes were slugging it out with temporal rulers like Henry over who had the right to appoint bishops.

As current practice shows, the popes won that protracted battle but eventually lost the war over the control of worldly affairs. Though the popes can exert moral influence, they lost the ability to direct international affairs a long time ago (?how many divisions does the pope have,? Stalin famously quipped).

Benedict XVI, therefore, lacks anything like the clout of Gregory VII. Unable to dish out many favors, however, he might seek a big one from Barak Obama when the President comes calling in July. Obama could be seen as good medicine for a struggling papacy: a popular, gregarious young politician who has won widespread admiration and popularity, some of the very things Benedict needs to prop up a sagging reign.

Under Benedict, controversies and personal style have contributed to a troubled papacy and a loss of prestige. Some of the problem stems from such bumbles as his mishandling of a Holocaust-denying bishop and his inflammatory words regarding Muslims. Another source is his history as head of the Holy Office, during which he cracked down on dissidents as John Paul II's hardliner. Another major factor, his inability to inspire crowds and to connect with people, both huge assets of John Paul, is tied to his inward personality and hence less alterable. The net effect of these causes is a diminished papacy.

The dynamics of summit-type meetings such as the upcoming one between Benedict and Obama, set for July 10, could be easier to forecast if there existed an 'envy scale' that measured who craved things that others had. The behavior of Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown could hinge, for example, on his envy of French President Nicolas Sarkozy's swagger. Vladimir Putin may have always had the upper hand on George W. Bush because Putin was even more successful than he was in breaking the law to serve his own purposes. The jealousy factor can take many forms, but it must certainly make a big difference in outcomes.

Taking envy as a variable, it appears that Obama has much more of what Benedict wants than vice versa. Things like magnetism, likeability, diplomacy, bridge-building. Benedict may have already signaled his yearning for these benefits by cutting Obama slack regarding the President's stand on abortion. As the storm mounted over Notre Dame's decision to give the pro-choice Obama an honorary degree, the Vatican entered its qualified

support of Obama's position. If you were the pope, and you wanted to borrow from the president's political capital, wouldn't you do likewise? It isn't exactly sidling up to Obama but it does place the president and pope together in the public eye, on some sort of common ground, a positioning that could be useful later.

Other presidents have tended to radiate the envy when meeting popes. They envied the pope's mythical power over American Catholics and acted like schoolboys during a home visit from the school principal. They were on their best behavior, hoping that their hospitality and show of good will toward the leader of the Catholic world would pay dividends at the polls. John Paul II was a master of exercising this trump card and for whatever reason U.S. Catholics tilted Republican during his time.

Obama appears to occupy a much more independent place. He has forged his own constituency, gained a majority of the Catholic vote, and therefore doesn't particularly need papal approbation though he would surely welcome it. Though he doesn't seem to envy anything the pope has, with the possible exception of that nice summer house, there is one aspect of the papacy that might make Obama think twice, especially on the hard days when Republicans have ripped into him and scores of interest groups have pounded on his door demanding action. Obama might harbor some desire to switch jobs with the pope because, well, the pope isn't expected to do anything new whereas he's on the "agenda of change" hot seat every day.

It's not that the pope has nothing to do. Far from it. His calendar is jammed. But to do his job mostly means doing the same things every day that his predecessors have done for hundreds of years. Tiring, to be sure, but it's not the same as trying to shoe horn a new energy policy or a health care bill through Congress. Or attempting to explain the rationale for a better policy toward captives at Guantanamo. The pope can preach about peace and justice from the confines of the Vatican, as he should, but doesn't have to encounter the devilish details of legislation to promote such ends.

As a scintillating speaker, Obama may at times wish he were in the pope's slippers where follow-through wasn't necessary. And what president wouldn't sometimes dream of ruling unilaterally, without the treat of veto or filibuster?

Obama may also take the occasion to ask the pope for tips in how to lead without wielding actual power, though the pope's record indicates he'd be poorly equipped to answer such a question.

They may talk about Obama's penchant for seeking common solutions to complex problems -- his post-partisanship strategy -- but Benedict isn't likely to be of much help there either. Despite the Vatican's assurance that Obama isn't "pro abortion" -- presumably opening the way to Obama's "middle ground" approach -- Benedict, like John Paul II, shows no taste for compromise. His stance is basically that of the Vatican I church with its "one true church" absolutism and its insistence on top-down loyalty to fixed church teachings. That kind of rigidity doesn't apply necessarily, however, to the application of Catholic social principles to particular problems such as the Middle East conflict, so there is a starting point for discussion on matters like abortion.

Out of that discussion, if the analysis of envy holds true, Benedict will want to conclude his conference with Obama on a decidedly positive note, exuding promise that the two can work together according the mutual interests of an activist president and a vigilant pope. And if the pope comes away with a spring in his step and a vow to "turn things around," credit that to his having traded envy in for some shared stature, at least for the moment.

Ken Briggs reported on religion for Newsday and The New York Times, has contributed articles to many publications, written four books and is an instructor at Lafayette College, Easton, Pa.

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