

A Bien Pensant Pope

The Pope's recent address to a joint session of Congress was greeted ecstatically, though (or perhaps *because*) it was notable mainly for its secular rather than for its religious pieties. It was the speech of a politician seeking re-election rather than that of the spiritual leader of a considerable part of mankind; as such, it seemed like the work not of a man intent upon telling the truth, however painful or unpopular, but that of a committee of speech-writers who sifted every word for its likely effect upon a constituency or audience, appealing to some without being too alienating of others. If ex-President Clinton had been elected Pope, he might have made the same speech, so perfect was its triangulation, so empty were its high-sounding phrases.

Pope Francis is not a subtle thinker, let alone a theologian of distinction. When interviewed on his aircraft after the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, he let it be known that if someone insulted his mother he could expect a retaliatory punch or slap, making a physical gesture to illustrate his point. This is not exactly the doctrine (if I have understood it aright) enunciated in the Sermon on the Mount; and one could not imagine John Paul II or Benedict XVI making so foolish or crude a mistake under the complacent impression that he was charming the world thereby.

Francis' propensity to run after false gods, most of them fashionable in the constituency to which he evidently wants to appeal, no doubt accounts for his popularity. He is not so much prophetic as *bien pensant*