Popes and Circumstance

By Theodore Dalrymple

I confess (if I may use the word in this context) that I had little regard for the late pope. I took against him, as it were, early in his papacy when I saw his reaction to some Muslim outrage (or outrage committed by a Muslim), whose precise nature I now forget.

The pope was in an airplane on the way to or from an international papal visit. He said that if someone insulted his mother, you would expect him as a son to strike him back, and he made a gesture as if to punch that person.

This might be true as a generalization of what we expect of the world as it is, but, though I am no theologian, it seemed to me not to be fully in accordance with the doctrine of the organization of which he was the head. It also seemed to me to oscillate between explanation and endorsement. In fact, I thought what he said both cowardly and stupid, and many of his pronouncements since in the realm of public policy seemed to me shallow and complacent.

That said, I was saddened by news of his death, as I am saddened (increasingly) by the news of any old person's death; and particularly as he had suffered a prolonged illness but

nevertheless adhered to his duty by appearing in public on the very verge of death. One cannot but respect him for that.

But I noticed in the wake of his death that he was praised for having modernized the papacy (though some criticized him for not having gone far enough in that direction). I found this interesting and, in a way, revealing, for it gave to modernization an automatically positive valency irrespective of any possible result.

But modernization is an intrinsically hazardous process for an organization that claims to be in possession of transcendent truth. As the Islamists well understand, once carping criticism of the supposedly indubitable is permitted, there is no knowing where it may lead: for example, rejection of the whole doctrine—lock, stock, and barrel—or, if I may be allowed a slight change of metaphor, a throwing out of the baby with the bathwater (assuming that there is a baby in the bathwater in the first place).

To modernize ritual, liturgy, and ceremonial is extremely dangerous from the point of view of any church that does it. Not only does it encourage the rationalist criticism that can easily undermine faith—why is any of it necessary, and why have we been following it for so long?—but, given the present state of our language and everyday comportment, modernization will lead inevitably to the complete banalization of the church. You have only to compare the King James Version of the Bible with the largely sniveling, completely jejune modern versions to see that this is so.

> *I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.*
> *My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.*
> *He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber.*

Compare this with:

> *I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from?*
> *My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of Heaven and earth.*
> *He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not sleep.*

Now, as it happens, I don't believe a word of it, but the first version at least makes me wish that I did. If it is objected that people do not speak in the language of the first version, it ought to be pointed out that they never did. No one ever said, even in the 17th century, "Good morning, Mr. Smith, I ask you why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these." (In modern versions, "Why take ye thought for raiment?" becomes "Why are you anxious about clothing?"—to which the reply would surely be, "Because my socks have a hole in them," or, "My shirt is missing a button," or, "Other people will laugh at me.")

The whole point of religious language, liturgy, and ceremonial is not that it should imitate daily life, but that it should sacralize it. Language that is appropriate to shopping in the supermarket (the kind that modern translations of the Bible tend to employ) is not appropriate to worship—I am aware of the difference even though I am an atheist, which increasingly clerics seem not to be. The fact is, however, that we refuse to recognize that what is fitting in one situation is not fitting in another. How you dress for relaxing on a Saturday afternoon, for example, is not fitting for a funeral. In the name of some kind of equality, authenticity, or sincerity, we demand that our language, our dress, our comportment should be the same in whatever situation we find ourselves.

There is also something odiously complacent about the use of the word "modernization." It assumes that what is modern is best, and therefore that we, the moderns, have reached an

unprecedented state of enlightenment. In some things this may be true; no one would wish to go back to the anesthetic practices of the 1930s, for example, let alone those of the 1850s.

But that is not to say that we are the best or most enlightened in everything. To modernize is not the same as to improve. Jeff Koons is undoubtedly more modern than Donatello, but it would be a very strange judgment indeed that the more than half a millennium between them brought about uninterrupted sculptural improvement, resulting in the greatest works ever produced.

The word "modernization" as an unthinking term of approbation is one of what Francis Bacon called "the idols of the marketplace." "Men," says Bacon, "believe that their reason governs words; but it is also true that words react on the understanding." We are mesmerized by our astonishing progress, and thus we come to think that the more in accord with our current ideas an institution is, and the more it changes, the better it must be.

If is not careful, the Catholic Church will be improved into a state first of schism, and then of extinction.

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