

Rome Diary 49 / June 13, 2003

In a meeting Thursday in the Vatican's Clementine Hall with people who have been most involved in his travels over the years, the pope explained why he has been such a frequent flyer: "Right from the day I was elected as Bishop of Rome, October 16, 1978, with special intensity and urgency I heard the echo of Jesus' command: 'Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all of creation' – to tell everyone that the Church loves them, that the Pope loves them and likewise to receive from them the encouragement and example of their goodness, of their faith."

So far, so good.

He also said that his trips also allow him to manifest "a specific exercise of the ministry proper to the Successor of Peter, that is, 'the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity in faith and in communion.'"

Well, maybe.

But if I could see the pope (which I cannot: he doesn't give interviews to mere reporters), I'd ask him: "Didn't other popes give witness to the unity of the faith without logging millions of miles on Alitalia?" I'd ask him if his 100 trips have now set a standard for his successors. I'd say, "Will they, too, have to dance to the ends of the earth until they drop?" I am sure the pope would wave that question off and say he intends nothing of the sort. So, why then, has he been such a far-darter? His remarks in the Sala Clementina gave us a clue:

"In all of my trips, I have felt like a pilgrim visiting that special shrine known as (God's) people. In these shrines I have been able to contemplate the face of Christ, both disfigured as on the Cross or resplendent in light like on Easter morning."

Now the pope was losing me by striking a too-pious note: he was looking right through people so he could see "the face of Christ?" I guess we all use people in ways that are conscious and unconscious, but this is a new one on me. I wonder what would happen if he looked at people and sized them up and saw them for what they were, or how he could even do that without listening to them? As a (sometimes) self-professed Servant of the Servants of God, a listening pope might learn something that would make him a better Servant.

But if you ask the bishops who have hosted him on his hundred trips, from Alaska to Azerbaijan, they will tell you this pope has not been a world-class listener. He was known to pound both fists on the dinner table and shout if someone told him, for example, as Bishop Remi de Roo once did, "Your Holiness, we have to talk about the ordination of married men."

So why does the pope travel? Frankly, I wish he'd admit that he loves the adulation of huge crowds – the bigger the better. But he doesn't have to admit this: his actions fairly shout it. I saw him up close and personal (as they say) inside Madison Square Garden in the fall of 1979, riding around the arena in an open jeep as a band blared the theme song from "Rocky." He was fit and feisty and he was up on the balls of his feet, smiling and giving the kids a thumbs-up, and his broad Slavic face said, "God, am I enjoying this!" That's the way it was during his first years as pope, as he reveled in the cheers of million-and-over multitudes – of a million in Mexico, two million in Chile, five million in Manila. And when, later on, when the novelty of the man in the white cassock wore down, and the crowds began to dwindle, he promoted jamborees for teenagers where he could preen in their approval.

Once, Cardinal Evaristo Arns asked John Paul II why he didn't turn his attention to a reform of the Roman Curia. The pope told him he'd leave that to his successor. So much for reform on his watch – not only of the Roman Curia, but also of the system that has made the official, institutional Church a laughing stock around the civilized world. If his successor has had a wet finger to the breeze (increasingly possible now because of the Internet), he will put his blessing on "the people's Church" intended by the Fathers of Vatican II, a Church that will have no truck with pope-as-monarch. One of the pope's cardinal-sycophants claims the pope is "accountable only to God" and that the world's bishops are accountable only to the pope. So we have many bishops who, when they aren't being cowed by public prosecutors, still act like lords. And priests who don't much like to go out in public any more wearing their Roman collars.

Theologically and historically, the pope's primacy comes from this, that he is the Shepherd of Rome. But this is a shepherd who never got to know his own. And those in his own shop who did get to know him didn't much like him. Fr. Reginald Foster, the pope's Latinist who works 150 feet down the hall on the third floor of the papal palace, last talked with him in 1982. "I'd like to see the pope," he said not long ago to the cardinal secretary of state. Cardinal Sodano said, "You can see him on television." Another of the pope's men who works under Sodano, a priest from France, calls Wojtyla "l'empereur."

When he was sexy and sixty, Wojtyla was too busy to schmooze with his inferiors. Or with the members of his cabinet, even with some of those heading his dicasteries. He yanked Archbishop Jean Jadot out of his job as top Vatican diplomat in the U.S. and brought him to lead the Council for Non-Christians. Jadot cooled his heels for two years before the pope asked to see him. He was too busy going off to places like Ugudugu and Senegal "to see the face of Christ" – and to let the people see the face of God. One local journalist explained the pope's attraction in Nigeria to Wilton Wynn of Time magazine: "To many of our people, the pope is a spiritual figure who lives in heaven and comes down to earth in Rome. Just think what it means to them to understand that he is a real person who cares enough to come to see them." He visited Africa eleven times.

Now that he is eighty-three and ailing, the pope has even less time, or energy, or desire to think about what is ailing the Church. A vigorous, fit and feisty pope would launch a wide inquiry about all the problems that come under the category "ministry in the Church." Right now, however, those who hold jobs in the institutional Church cannot even talk about the ordination of women. Priest shortage? The pope won't hear talk of that either. On some Pacific Islands, where the people see a priest every two years or so, his bishops have asked for permission to ordain married men. He told them that God will provide. In the Polish cosmos, that means God will provide us with sufficient celibate males. Just wait and see.

I am writing this grumpy diary entry from Carmel, California, where I am teaching some courses in writing for the next six weeks. I find I can cover Rome from Carmel pretty much as I cover Rome from Rome: via the telephone and the Internet. On Tuesday, I gave some guidance to a producer from CBS's 60 Minutes. We talked for 32 minutes. He was in London; I was on my cell phone, driving 80 miles an hour toward Los Gatos on the 101. On Wednesday, I chatted with a source in the Jesuit Curia. He was in hot, humid Rome. I was not far from the white sands of Pebble Beach.

This morning on my Mac PowerBook, I learned from the Vatican Information Service about the pope's upcoming trip to Bosnia-Herzegovina on June 22, where he will beatify Servant of God Ivan Merz and see the face of Christ at 11:30 a.m. in the crowd that gathers on a plain in front of the Convent of the Most Holy Trinity of the Order of the Friars Minor in Petricevac. He will also say a few words before praying the Angelus, then eat lunch with bishops from Bosnia-Herzegovina and with cardinals and bishops of the entourage in the bishop's residence in Banja Luka, receive the president of the Serbian Republic and the president of the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and meet a half-hour later with the country's inter-religious council, then visit the Catholic cathedral in Banja Luka before he hops on the papal plane at 7:15 p.m. – after a farewell ceremony in the airport.

God knows what he, or all those other folks, will get out of all this. Maybe this trip to Bosnia-Herzegovina will give him enough Frequent Flyer Miles to get that First Class Ticket to heaven.

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