

## **PUBLIC LIVES**

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### **Popes and princes**

The royalty and the papacy in the modern world no longer wield substantial political power, yet the beliefs surrounding them have remained as vibrant as ever. So compelling are these beliefs even today that modern media find themselves ineluctably drawn into the swirl of royal and pontifical events. In the process, they sometimes become the unwitting purveyors of the same royalist and theocratic mindsets that they oppose in the name of modernity and democracy.

One might think it natural for the BBC to set aside its regular programming in order to report on the wedding of the heir to the British throne. BBC is after all British. Perhaps no other European nation lavishes as much public attention on its royalty than the British. They have long stripped their monarchs of all state roles and functions except the symbolic ones, yet they expect them to act still as if they were a different class of human beings.

Poor Prince William and his bride Kate, who seem as modern as their generation, would probably have preferred a quiet and simple ceremony to the spectacular tourist event that their wedding has become. But as every love-struck commentator notes, theirs cannot be a private family affair. Besides, it is good for the economy, and it is good too for a world grown weary of wars and calamities.

We can expect CNN and Fox News to try to outdo BBC, though they are American. And since the international networks are doing it, so must we. Despite the fact that we are a republic, and we don't have the faintest trace of any monarchical tradition, our fascination with royalty is as strong as that of the Americans'. We are mesmerized by royalty, completely oblivious

of the hierarchical, feudal, and often tyrannical social orders they once presided over.

It is no doubt a pure coincidence that the beatification of the well-loved Pope John Paul II is happening in the same week as the British royal wedding. But they do have an affinity with one another. As the Inquirer editorial the other day very aptly put it, these two events “afford the world a chance to see how two ancient institutions – the monarchy and the papacy – reinforce their claim to perpetuity and continuing relevance by a show of pomp and pageantry.”

I am at a loss to understand what relevance the royalty might continue to have in a world of nation-states in which hereditary rule is frowned upon. Even their role as symbols for a homogeneous people is bound to be emptied by the multiculturalism that the present scale of global migration is bringing about. But, it is easy to see the significance of the late John Paul II's beatification for the Church's difficult struggle to maintain its doctrinal and institutional leadership of the world's Christian population in an era where the religious orientation itself is being compartmentalized.

Perhaps no other pope has been more aware of the challenges that modernity poses to the Church than Benedict XVI, John Paul's successor. Benedict knows, more than many bishops and priests, that the Church cannot fight modernity. That it must find its place in the modern world, and unceasingly define and differentiate its role in society in a secular age. That is what accounts for his many writings on the relationship between faith and reason, and for his insistence that the clergy resolutely avoid the temptation of being entangled in temporal powers such as those offered by politics.

As those who are familiar with the history of the Church know, the point of view at the Vatican had not always been like this. About five hundred years ago, Pope Pius III forbade the celebration of the Mass for the repose of the soul of his predecessor, Pope Alexander VI, aka Rodrigo Borgia, who was thought so morally unfit that his remains were removed from the St. Peter's

Basilica. Even Machiavelli, the theoretician of shrewd politics, called this pope a politician without honor.

That was a period when popes possessed and ruled over empires, maintained armies, and behaved like monarchs. Europe's royalty confessed to them under threat of eternal damnation. Pope Alexander VI was known especially for his ambition and ruthlessness. He purchased his fellow cardinals to secure the papacy. He got rid of his enemies through assassination and then seized their properties. He kept mistresses and had children by them. He appointed one of his sons, Cesare Borgia, a cardinal, and used the marriage of his only daughter, Lucrezia Borgia, as a tool to enhance his political alliances. Cesare Borgia, the son, who later relinquished his red hat, became such an accomplished and shrewd ruler in his own right that Machiavelli used him as the model for his prince, the new type of rulers that were emerging during that time.

That Benedict XVI would be presiding over the beatification of his predecessor, John Paul II, who is being honored for his saintliness and remarkable humility as God's shepherd is certainly a story that stands out against the dark Vatican narrative that Pope Alexander VI represented. This story tells us how the Church has moved on from its medieval roles, even if many of its clerics might still cling to the old practices and privileges. Pope John Paul II probably wielded more influence in world affairs than any head of state of his time. Yet that influence owed nothing to whatever wealth or power the Vatican as a state commanded. This we cannot say of any of today's remaining monarchs.

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