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Pope as Media Star: A Long Career Full of Reinvention

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Abstract

On the whole, a man who is elected as Pope is well on in years. Some, despite this, have managed to reign for a long time, Leo XIII for instance who came to the throne when he was already seventy in 1878, reigned for twenty five years. Wojtyla was elected when he was only fifty eight, in 1978. In the last century or so, the papacy has become visible worldwide through the mass media. On his accession, Wojtyla was presented as a man's man, a sportsman – according to Professor Eamon Duffy of Cambridge University – as a Bishop with balls. Like other media stars who have stayed the test of time, e.g. Madonna, David Bowie, it seems that he has been able to reinvent his media image to some extent; from the active sportsman to the benevolent grandfather to the ailing figure we see today. He has taken on the aspect of a media star, a world traveller, a spiritual leader, a politician, a mediator and a peace leader.

He has been described as the most-photographed person on the planet. This paper will attempt to trace these changes and to ascertain, using Vatican and media sources to discover how much of this continual change is driven by the personality of John Paul himself and how much is a deliberate policy on the part of the Vatican.

Pope as Media Star: A Long Career Full of Reinvention

*‘Every photo is a re-evocation of our mortality.
Every photo deals with life and death.
Every photo has an aura of the sacred.
Every photo is more than the glance of a man
And is greater than the capacity of his photograph.
Every photo is also an aspect of creation
Outside time
Of a divine vision.’¹*

Wim Wenders (1993) *Una Volta*, Roma: Socrates.p23.

He has his own radio station, television station and internet site. They are based in Rome. He has made bestselling CDs. He commands great audiences and people rush to see him pass in the street. He is watched on television all over the world. He tours incessantly and has a team of 'roadies'. He is neither a pop star nor is he (now) an actor. He has written plays. He has two doctorates. He is neither young nor beautiful, but he uses the media well. He is not Silvio Berlusconi. He seems to be almost universally admired. He works with commoners and kings - as at home with politicians and royalty as with small children. He is the Pope.

This is a man whose work is to be the representative on earth of what Thomas M. Martin has called "the Imageless"², and he must demonstrate this to the public whether Catholic, of another religious persuasion, or unbeliever. In a Time article³, John Paul is reported as being insistent that his role as Pope is "... *not to be confused with his own person. He doesn't use the papal "we" but always says, "I think", "I believe", "I wonder."* However much he may protest or demur, after nearly twenty four years as Pontiff, his persona is inextricably linked with his role. There are people who have now reached their majority who have known no other Pope. He has become the front-man of the Church in such a way that a 'Popecentric' Church has become evident.

The mass media, which Paul VI described as "*a most powerful means of social transformation*",⁴ have enabled a globalisation of communication unparalleled at any other time in history. We can watch simultaneous broadcasting from any part of the world - or as on July 20th, 1969, even from the Moon. In speaking to cinema

¹ My translation.

² Martin, Thomas M. (1981) *Images and the Imageless: A Study in Religious Consciousness and Film*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press and London and Toronto: Associated University Presses.

³ 'Clash of Faiths' *Time*, January 26, 1998, Vol.151. No3 (electronic edition).

⁴ Apostolic letter - Octogesimo Adveniens 20.

industry leaders whilst visiting the USA in 1987, Pope John Paul II said:

“Yours is indeed a profound influence on society... Hundreds of millions of people see your films and television programmes, listen to your voices, sing your songs and reflect on your opinions, it is a fact that your smallest decisions can have global impact.”⁵

Media’s ability to penetrate the private and cultural space of anyone at any place on the planet,⁶ combined with John Paul’s use of the media has combined to make him a star worldwide. Through the years of his papacy his “image” has changed from that of the “man’s man that women could love”, through the ‘benevolent grandfather’ to the ‘suffering servant’ we see now.

Fore has suggested that those in the media can woo the viewer or listener by:

“... taking their own genuine needs (to be safe, to be liked, to be comfortable) and using them to create other needs which make them not only willing but quite eager to agree to what is being said, to buy what is being sold...”⁷

Other religious leaders have achieved some media recognition: Mother Theresa, St. Pio of Pietrelcina, Billy Graham or Fulton Sheen, for instance. From a political point of view there have also been religious leaders who were, or are, political leaders: The Ayatollah Khomeini, Osama bin Laden and, further back, Archbishop Makarios, come to mind, but John Paul’s image is, on the whole, a positive one. As Dayan and Katz have suggested (209), he has used “... *televised trips to turn virtual power into effective authority.*” Yet, as Arias has said [Arias, p.80], his style is not diplomatic. Mussolini is said to have suggested that the crowd was like a woman – it needed a strong man, and this is the type of public persona that John Paul shows, even now in his infirmity, perhaps particularly so as his sheer doggedness in continuing has become more apparent. Perhaps also, like others who have been prominent in the media for many years, he has become almost treasured, just as, say,

⁵ *Wavelengths* Vol.XLVIII. June 1995 p. 13.

⁶ “In some cases, the media is controlled by powerful political, economic and ideological forces, since the mass media can sometimes be a means of cultural invasion, undermining the traditional, religious and family values in Asia, education and formation as to their use is very important” *John Paul II. Letter to the Delegates of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Councils Vth Plenary Assembly, Bandung, 1990*

⁷ William F. Fore (1986) 'Communication and religion in the technological era' in *The Myth of the Information Revolution: Social and Ethical Implications of Communication Technology*. London/Beverly Hills and Newbury Park/New Delhi: Sage Publications. p128

Frank Sinatra, even when it was evident that his best days had long past.

Accession

1978 was a difficult year for the Roman Catholic church. Paul VI, the Pope since 1963, had been in declining health and finally died on August 6th. John Paul I, formerly Patriarch of Venice, was elected Pope on August 26th, but died on September 28th and rumours began to circulate that his death was not from natural causes. However many disclaimers have been made, these rumours have continued to the present day. The shock waves that went round the world at his sudden death caused Cardinal König of Vienna to say:

“It is necessary to reduce the physical and spiritual overload to which the Pope is subjected by his position, delegating to others some of the pontifical functions.”⁸

Another Conclave met, and Karol Wojtyla became John Paul II on October 16th. John Paul I was 67, the new Pope was 58. He had not been considered a front-runner for the papacy. However, Manacorda (1999) has suggested that the recalling of a Conclave so quickly after the election of John Paul I may have meant that the normal political manoeuvring around Conclaves failed. For the first time in four hundred years there was a non-Italian Pope. This was a Pope who, far from avoiding the overload of which König spoke, seemed even to take on a greater load by means of his continuous appearances and travels. Many in the crowd outside St. Peter’s were confused at the announcement of his name – just who was this person? An eye-witness at the declaration of his election has told me that an Italian couple in front of him in the crowd gathered at St. Peter’s Square turned to each other and asked: “What will he do with us?” They warmed to him somewhat when he addressed the world in Italian. His first words were: “Don’t be afraid”

Frossard (1989) said that he was conscious of being at a rare event, something between a design of providence and a moment in the history of man. Wojtyla had first come to public notice at the Second Vatican Council at which he spoke on a number of occasions. He was widely travelled, had studied in Italy, was considered an intellectual and had an interesting, if somewhat unusual, biography for a Pope. His past activities included periods of time when he was a manual labourer and he had also been an actor and a writer of plays and poetry. Most popes are introduced to the flock on the basis of their intellectual, spiritual or curial abilities and achievements. This one was presented, as Professor Eamon

⁸ Quoted in Discepoli di Verità (2001) *All’Ombra del Papa infermo: Giovanni Paolo II nelle spire della nomenclatura vaticana*. Kaos Edizioni: Milano. My translation.

Duffy of Cambridge University has said: “as a Bishop with balls”.⁹

As late as 1986, William F. Fore suggested that the Churches were not taking sufficient interest in the information and communications revolution:

“... the religions of the world are facing not just a new Age of Information, but a new Technological Era, which brings with it an alternative worldview that challenges the worldviews of all the historical religions.”

However, by this time John Paul II had been using communications technologies as no other Pope had. He had become a star of the media by means of his travels around the world. In a 1998 article that describes his visit to Cuba, the author says:

“He was always a physical leader who knew how to speak with his body ... the long, bounding stride of his early pontificate...”¹⁰

Even in his infirmity, John Paul II is still able to “work” an audience in the manner of many accomplished performers. Vatican documents relating to communication perpetually stress the need for use of the media as tools for evangelisation, but the personal use of these media by the pontiff is mentioned only in relation to the regulation put forward by the Vatican for what Archbishop Foley, since 1984 President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication, has called the “comportment of the media companies”¹¹ As is the case with much of the rest of media output, the personality of the performer would seem to govern how they are seen by the media. But is he a star? A number of books have been written about the “star” and these fall into several categories: academic books, picture books, hagiographies and those others which, like Goldman’s books on Elvis Presley and John Lennon, debunk the myth behind the “star”. Perhaps the best known academic studies on “Stars” are those by Edgar Morin and Richard Dyer. I will use these (and other) studies to ascertain whether John Paul II is, indeed, a star.

⁹ Eamon Duffy in *John Paul II: The Millennial Pope – A Pope for the Ages at the Crossroads of History*.(1999) A Frontline Co-Production with Helen Whitney Productions in association with ARTE. Produced by Helen Whitney

¹⁰ 'Clash of Faiths' *Time*, January 26, 1998, Vol.151. No3 (electronic edition)

¹¹ Interview with Archbishop John F. Foley, President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, May 17th, 2002. See, for instance, *Istruzione circa alcuni aspetti dell'uso degli strumenti di comunicazione sociale nella promozione della dottrina della fede (Instructions for certain aspects of the use of the instruments of social communication in the promotion of the doctrine of the faith)*. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 30th March, 1992.

Is John Paul II a Star?

In a 5th September, 1999, interview on Channel 5 television in Britain, Leslie Grantham (actor) said:

“It doesn’t matter if you have a face like a Baboon’s bum, if you are on television often enough you become a star.”

John Paul II has one of the most photographed faces on the planet. From the forming of Vatican Television for the second time in 1983/1984 until February, 2000, Centro Televisivo Vaticano’s archive held 11,000 hours of film of him and it was anticipated that this footage would double by the end of the Jubilee Year.

For Morin, The life of a star is a life without limits (p.60). Stars can fly anywhere and be “shown” at film festivals. The Pope flies around the world and is “shown” at festivals of various types, the difference is that he has his own film festival –the only other star who does this (that I can think of) is Robert Redford with his Sundance Festival.. The film festival has hardly been reported in Britain, but generated the cover headline (*Rivista de Cinematografo e della Comunicazione Sociale*, Dicembre 1998): “Il Papa e il cinema; insieme per la vita” [The Pope and the Cinema: Together For Life”]. Morin suggests that the film festival “*attempts to prove to the universe that the stars are faithful to their image*”, perhaps his own film festival would suggest just this – that the Pope is a man who knows his image, and yet is that person who is, as he has himself said, separate from the job he does. The Pope’s film festival is different to those of which Morin speaks although Morin does use religious analogy in this context:

“Then begins the mystical, radiant, smiling ascension. This ceremony, an equivalent of the Roman triumph and the ascension of the virgin, is repeated daily. It is the great rite. The star is there, at [her] moment of extreme magic efficacy...”[Morin:62]

The constant appearances of John Paul are the type of ‘coronation’ experience of which Dayan and Katz [1992] write. “The star dedicates himself to the faithful” (Morin, p.90) and there is a never ending desire for information on him, a desire which for Morin displays the desire to “*worship and consume his god*” in order to capture the magic. Whilst there are obvious parallels to the sacrament of the Mass, the very public life of the Papacy, combined with his dedication to his faith and the faithful and a ‘hidden’ life in the Vatican – a mysterious enclosed land, where Secret Archives and the treasures of the ages are kept –only adds to the mystery of these “sacraments” and to the insatiable curiosity of the fan (or the faithful – or even the not so faithful!).

Morin suggests that the sites of film festivals lend geographical charm to the localization of the myth of the star.” (p.62). Rome is “La Città Eterna” – the eternal city, itself a location with a timeless quality, steeped in history, a place

which is itself the “star” of many films, instantly recognisable.

Who can resist a Cinderella story? For centuries, the papacy has been one of the roles to which even the poorest could aspire. John Paul has risen from being a manual labourer to the top job in the Roman Catholic Church. Few would envy him his place in society, few would envy him his life style.

Dyer suggests (p.10) that stars are images in media texts produced by film (or television) companies. Even though documentary and news films are seen as ‘factual’ they are still subject to their director – it is he/she who decides which shots to show. The Vatican has its own television company to do this. ‘The emanation of what Dyer [p.10] calls ‘special magic’ by stars might be enhanced by Paulo Freire’s suggestion that there are transitional periods in society, which he calls transivity, when there is an over-simplification of problems and a nostalgia for the past (Freire, p.18). He has suggested that man responds by looking for magical explanations to explain situations, which may be accentuated by strong emotional styles and by polemics rather than dialogue. Further, that at these times the consciousness of man requires that he be part of the mass, encouraging a tendency to gregariousness. All of these facets could be applied to the ‘magical quality’ shown by Popes, but particularly perhaps by John Paul II. The strong emotional style of his appearances have caused one Vatican official to tell me that he believes that this papacy will be remembered as the papacy of the gesture rather than the papacy of the Word. Freire’s warning is that this transivity may be followed by a critical state, but, in the meantime, the power produced by massification is ‘distorted, producing a mythical quality’ (Freire, p.20). Some Popes, John Paul II, John Paul I and John XXIII, have had a much greater affinity with the camera than others. The present Pontiff manages to combine with just that ‘special magic’ the role and performance – in other words, where Dyer quotes Haskell as positing that there is a contradiction between the role-as-written and the star image in a film text (p.18), John Paul manages to combine a star image with the text or role-as-written, that of being Pope, making the two into a role uniquely his own.

Market Economics

A star, Dyer suggests, brings something to the studios – or in this case film and television companies – in terms of capital, investment, outlay or market. In the case of the Pope(s) the capital is the spiritual and physical background against which they ply their trade. Representative of the huge church that is his owner in terms of a monopoly product, John Paul has the benefit of being able to ‘perform’ to camera and there is a certain standardisation in the way in which he is portrayed – just as John Wayne always played John Wayne, the Pope always

plays the Pope (see Dyer:10 on standardisation) The requirements in terms of investment and outlay are the costs of providing the equipment and personnel to make the film – he is the rare star who need not be paid. From the ‘market’ point of view, there seems to be a never-ending desire for film footage and photographs – even to the point where it made news (*Daily Telegraph*, 21st September 1999, front page) when his skull cap blew off three times during Mass. The problematic arises for Centro Televisivo Vaticano that it is impossible to copyright the image of a public person, and they have had to institute new systems to enable them to recoup some of their outlay. There is an insatiable curiosity about John Paul’s life, work and very persona. Available fan memorabilia is extensive, amongst other things, postcards, plates, books, glass snowstorms, keyrings, necklets, etc. as well as his written works. Unlike the usual film star memorabilia, it is purchased by people who see him on his travels, visit Rome or even their local parish churches. It is even bought by those who have no faith at all (perhaps in an effort to tap into the religious magic he emanates). If music, film and management companies could do this with their own ‘stars’ and move outside the normal fan base with their merchandising, they would surely be delighted. I would suggest, therefore, that it is consumption rather than production which drives the idea of the Pope as star. Just as Hes (Dyer, p.58) has suggested that pin-up girls can be seen as Virgins in Majesty, since their presentation could be said to be iconic, one could almost say that the Pope has become a pin up. Many of the photographs of the Pope are in fact ‘stills’. For Dyer (p.121) these ‘adverts’ set up certain expectations of a character and, in addition, genre expectations lead the audience to expect a certain kind of character. Morin also draws parallels between certain poses in photographs taken of stars (p.63) and religious images.

Morin has described the photograph as being the permanent alter ego and Barthes,(1981:57) the film screen as “*not a frame but a hideout: the man or woman who emerges from it continually living.*” Even dead Popes can thus continue to be stars. Barthes has further suggested that the photograph is a ‘punctum’ that shows the nature and time of the subject, but for Morin (p.92) it is the best “*ersatz of the real presence*”. Again, there is little need to draw religious parallels. Just as Morin has called the nature of stars ‘double’, in that it is both dream and reality (p.98) and suggests that it is “*the powers of projection which divinise*” the star – a state produced neither by industry nor talent but by the need to have such a person, so with the Pope. Elsewhere, Morin has written that the “*star is made of stuff compounded from life and dreams*” (Morin, p.102), and Wim Wenders, the film Director, wrote:

“Every photo is a re-evocation of our mortality.

Every photo deals with life and death.

Every photo has an aura of the sacred.”[Wenders: 1992]

John Paul's media presence, especially in his present infirmity, reminds us of our mortality, demonstrates his religious belief as something which gives meaning to both life and death and also brings an aura of the sacred to a world where the sacred is often missing, a world which many have written about as being increasingly secularised.

There is little possibility that the Pope everyone believes they know is anything like the actual personage, and there is a great need to "divinise" someone who is, after all, only a man – to credit him with powers which we mere mortals do not have. For the papacy, the concept of "life and dreams" would be particularly relevant in that the Pope is of this world and this life, but shows the way to dreams, to the dream of eternal life.

Sexual Attraction

Today, Popes are seen almost to be asexual due to their celibacy. In the case of John Paul II, the image projected at the beginning of his reign was one of the rugged outdoors man. He skied, climbed and swam. All of this was combined with the attributes of the intellectual. Although shown as a 'man's man', a softer side was also shown. The combination of the sportsman, the intellectual with two doctorates, the man of God and the man who could reach out to people is a winning one. Morin described "the great masculine archetype" in feature films who portrayed "... *justice, adventure; and daredevil feats*"(p.14). He described the comic hero as an innocent (p.113). Perhaps the combination of celibacy and appearance are factors which appeal to the 'audience' in the case of the present Pope. He has a tendency, when 'letting his hair down' to go for comic effect. He shows just that kindness and, occasionally, mischief of which Morin writes in relation to Chaplin. Film footage of the short-lived John Paul I makes this particularly evident through his questioning of a rather surprised altar boy at a Papal Audience. He displays what Morin has described as "the comic hero's innocence and permanent suffering for others." For Morin, such heroes represent not the profane, but the negative of the sacred, the profaned. I would suggest that, in the case of the papacy, it is in fact the sacred which is represented. The present Pontiff's stands for morality, for peace, for celibacy, for family values, are sometimes seen as occasions for laughter – he is seen almost as an ingenu. Times have changed and he has not, critics say, kept pace or understood the changes in society, and yet there is no doubt that his stand has been respected as the authentic beliefs of a man of real faith– to the extent that he has been called the "Man of the Century"[Kwitny, 1998], although Peter Hebblethwaite's book [2000] calls John XXIII almost the same thing.

For Dyer [p.24], the stars of early cinema were:

"... gods, and goddesses, heroes, models – embodiments of ideal ways of

behaving. In the later period, however, stars are identification figures, people like you and me – embodiments of typical ways of behaving.”

I would suggest that, in some mysterious way, John Paul has managed to combine both the ‘typical’ and the ‘ideal’. His position in life – as God’s representative on earth, someone seen by the public as a good man, a model of probity – displays the ‘ideal’. The fact that he has come from humble origins has enabled him to be ‘typical’. John Paul also manages to combine all three of the ‘conservative’ functions which Klapp suggests (Dyer,p.27). His media presence reinforces an image of a strong group (the Catholic Church) and also the values in society which are seen to be under threat. He ‘seduces’, but not in Klapp’s sense. Instead of leading a ‘*person into experience felt traditionally to be wrong eludes and confuses morality*’ (Dyer, p.27) he leads those outside the Church into a belief that perhaps Catholicism is not all that bad if he is its representative. As for ‘transcendence’, he offers a feeling of integrity, as well as the redefining and recreation of ‘... *standards by which experience is to be judged*’ (Dyer:28). Morin (17-18) has suggested that new structures promoted the audience’s escape to an avoidance of realism. To a certain extent this is true of the Pope, his appearance in the flesh, on film or television, provide an escape from an increasingly atheistic and unbelieving world, transcendence to another plane and the possibility of an afterlife. John Paul also displays the total sincerity, which Dyer mentions (p.33), and about which – in other contexts – Paddy Scannell has written extensively (pp. 58-75).

As part of that societal élite which has always been pictorially represented in portraiture, popes have always been stars. They were, and are, part of the politically and spiritually powerful, on a par with royalty. Upward mobility has always been part of the star’s glamour, and there are few positions in life which can be attained that have higher status.

Audience Foreknowledge

The ‘audience’ has a “*certain foreknowledge*”, according to Dyer (p.121), of what to expect from a star. In this case, it is a foreknowledge of what Popes were, or at least what the audience thought they were, or were supposed to be. The present Pontiff, rather like Madonna or David Bowie, seems to have reinvented himself with the passing of time, and has carried much of his “fan base” with him. He has changed from the sportsman to the enfeebled but dogged man we now see, still able to present his beliefs and strength of purpose to the public. Is the image we perceive an actuality? Dyer, amongst others, has suggested that dress is culturally coded and assumed to be indicative of personality[p.124] (although non-pc now, we might consider the good guy – white clothes, bad guy – black clothes. Even if non-pc, how many of those who try to shock in the world of popular music go for the all black wardrobe?). The continuation of the style of dress, white cassock

and skull cap, vestments, with or without mitre, has probably contributed to this sense of foreknowledge. However, the Pope has on occasion (World Youth Day, Paris, 1997, for instance) commissioned what might be considered “way-out” vestments. Particularly in the early days of his reign, he was often shown skiing, hiking, and so on. Cultural encoding in Britain, even in the presence of the package holiday, would suppose that this ‘encoding’ meant that this was a wealthy, strong person. In mountainous regions of central Europe, skiing is not so closely associated with the wealthy and even in Britain, I do not remember this being mentioned. Evidently, the notion that the star does not excite envy held sway here.

Popes have been endlessly written and spoken about and considered. For them, there is no hiding place (Morin:59). The fact that the Pope is a celibate probably adds a certain frisson to the story – perhaps this could be likened to the ingenue’s contract requirement which, for instance under the auspices of the Rank Organisation’s starlet system in the 1940s and 1950s, constrained her to a life of chastity – at least in the public eye. Since the ‘50s when such contracts existed, times have changed and when a person in the public eye admits to a life of celibacy they are usually considered to be a bit feeble and perhaps rather strange. The Pope seems to have risen above this, although there is always conjecture (particularly in view of recent scandal) that celibates really don’t obey the rules and it is this which gives the frisson.

Appearance

At his election, John Paul’s physique would not have been out of place on a farm anywhere in middle Europe. Stocky, his general solidity of person, particularly at the start of his reign, when compared with, say, the rather aesthetic looks of Pius XII or Paul VI, or the fragility of John Paul I, undoubtedly encouraged the idea that he was dependable and physically capable. The combination of this with his perceived intellectuality; his robes of office; his continual appearances worldwide and his stand for the underdog, combined with his perceived spirituality, added to his star status. Barthes (p.91) wrote that:

“... the effigy of a [candidate] establishes a personal link between him and the [voters]”

and I would suggest that the image of the Pope, continually in our newspapers, on our screens (and even on our computers by internet), in combination with his physical appearance, built up just such a personal link with the public. Barthes also wrote (1993:47), in “The Iconography of the Abbé Pierre”.

“It is a fine physiognomy, which clearly displays all the signs of apostleship: a benign expression..... The Abbé Pierre’s haircut, obviously devised so as to reach a neutral equilibrium between short hair (an

indispensable convention, if one does not want to be noticed) and unkempt hair (a state suitable to express contempt for other conventions), thus becomes the capillary archetype of saintliness: the saint is first and foremost a being without formal context; the idea of fashion is antipathetic to the idea of sainthood.”

Just as, say, Cary Grant, had his own style almost outside fashion, so the popes have a certain neutrality which, as in Barthe’s piece, are reflections of their estate in life and of their lifestyle.

Interiority

For an actor in a play or in a feature film, the most difficult thing to show is the interior motivation of the character being played. Partially this can be assisted, in the case of film of John Paul II, by the voice-over. The commentator will say something along the lines of: “... *showing his great desire to continue with his public appearances ...*” We are able to see “close-ups” of public personages. We are closer to them than we are ever likely to be in real life. We can “read” the faces of the person on view. We can read pleasure, pain, honesty, sympathy, sincerity, etc. Paddy Scannell has written:

“Sincerity demands not so much that you say what you mean, but that you mean what you say.” (Scannell:67).

The ‘Close-up’, enables us to see the pain or pleasure on the Pope’s face, but he uses this to advantage. At times he resorts to what might be termed “crowd pleasers”. Far from the view of a serious and forbidding person expected, perhaps, because of his stands on theological, dogmatic or ethical matters, he will sometimes start a sing-along (as in Poland, 1999). He can draw the crowd to him as he did with his gesture (repeated on more than one occasion) of making his hands into ‘spectacles’ and looking at the crowd. There is always the ruse, more often associated with aspiring politicians, of kissing babies and children, or hugging people – all of which he has done often. In the case of John Paul, this is not seen as a vote-winning exercise. It is seen as an exhibition of humility and of affection, an expression of his interior being.

Movie stars:

“... metamorphose themselves. Under the pressure of an increasingly insistent force, the role of love swells and sweeps the screen”[p.10]

For the Pope, however, this love is something he projects and which the audience accepts. To further quote Morin (p.18):

“For the soul is precisely the site where real and imaginary encounter and feed upon each other; love, that phenomenon of the soul which mingles

most intimately our imaginary projection – identification and our real life, assumes an increased importance.”

The use here of a religious concept, the soul, together with the emanation of love (which is what Christianity is about) is most striking in the context of the Pope as a media star.

Although Morin has suggested that stars are always beautiful, there are many exceptions to this (Jackie Coogan, Edward G. Robinson, the French concept of the “*jolie laide*”). The definition of beauty is open to discussion, and John Paul is certainly not a person who could be considered beautiful, he might, however, fit well with Morin’s further suggestion that:

“The star is above all an actress or an actor who becomes the subject of the myth of love, to the point of instigating a veritable cult.” (Morin, p.40).

Morin likening of the fan club to the churches and his suggestion that they are, in part, in place to propagate the faith – need to have no religious parallels drawn. Although even Catholics are not equally enamoured of the Pope, there are people, both lay and religious, whose fandom could be described in the terms that Morin uses:

“The fan, however, accepts himself, purely and simply as an earthworm. He wants to be loved, but quite humbly. It is this inequality [*to the star*], which characterises religious love, adoration which is not reciprocal but eventually recompensed.”

Anyone who has been present at a papal event will know what it is like to attend a pop concert. If one is standing or seated next to the aisle where the Pope will pass by, his approach is marked by the rush of the crowd to be nearer to him, to touch him, photograph him, talk to him. It is not a pleasant experience to be crushed under the weight of a group of people (quite often nuns) attempting to do this. They may think they are trying to imitate the woman in the Bible story, who feeling unworthy to speak to Jesus, touched the hem of his robe in order to be cured, in fact they are following the same impulses as fans at an appearance of a media idol. At a July 2002 audience an eye witness reported a woman presenting her small son to the Pope, then pushing the son aside, going onto her knees, repeatedly kissing the Pope’s hand and then using his knee (which she had been repeatedly patting!) as a prop to raise herself with.¹²

Morin suggested (p.84) that gifts to stars are a type of religious offering, those who approach the Pope, however, tend to ask for prayer, for peace, for intervention and, in the case of Ali Akbah or those attending confession, for

¹² Conversation with Magdalen Ross, July 2002.

forgiveness, although it is not unknown for people in the crowds to present him with things, and at the weekly audiences a large amount of merchandise of one kind or another is presented to him (pictures, statuary, etc.).

The near delirium that Morin suggests accompanies the appearance of stars would accurately describe the visits of the Pope. However, this does not always happen. During John Paul's visit to St. Louis, USA, in 1999, the city authorities issued warnings about problems which might occur if large crowds gathered. An unforeseen consequence of these warnings was that people stayed at home and watched the events on television.¹³ A very different attitude to that shown by the Bishops before his visit to Slovenia:

“For the faithful, the meeting with the Pope is not going to be just a performance. It will be an act of worship that we cannot entirely experience in front of our tv set.

However, the tv coverage will be very important for those who will not be present because of illness or some other urgent matter that cannot be postponed’¹⁴

Jerome Joseph Day, OSB, has suggested that John Paul saw an opportunity to use the media that had “*reified ecclesial coverage, declining, depressed, dying*”. (Day:2). He believes that public papal meetings offer little opportunity for two-way communication, since they are routinised and scripted – that any confrontation occurs behind closed doors. It is to the credit of the Pope and to his ability to communicate, that people do feel that he has spoken to them. Personal experience of attendance at papal events shows that he almost “feeds” on the energy from the crowd. He picks up their comments in the way that a comedian might, and he answers them back. Ecclesial decisions may be made behind closed doors, but there is certainly two-way communication. He has a sense of timing – particularly for the comic effect - and the consequence is that the crowd identify with him. Either he reflects their religious lifestyle or the lifestyle to which they would like to aspire.

Ritual

In opposition to Benjamin's suggestion that “*changes in the medium of contemporary perception can be comprehended as decay of the aura*” (Benjamin:222), he has given himself and the Roman Catholic church another face – a magical, almost shamanic aura, enhanced by the group acceptance of his position as Pope. He offers a “performance” of rituals in the sense that Lévi-Strauss [1963] has suggested. Not just a reproduction or mimesis of events, but:

¹³ Conversation with Brother W.E.Biernatzki,S.J.

¹⁴ 23rd April, 1996, Letter of the Slovenian bishops

“He actually relives them in all their vividness, originality, and violence.”

“Ritual is relatively unique among communication forms, in the extent to which is simultaneously depends on an actor’s performance and operates as a condition on that performance, limiting the range of the actor’s choices.” [Rothenbuhler, p.67]

The Pope’s continual performances add a form of magic to his image. Perhaps an exceptionally good example of the veracity of Samuel Goldwyn’s quote: “God makes the stars. It’s up to the producers to find them.” (Dyer, p.18) In this case, however, the “producers” are the Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church together with the Holy Spirit – and, from a media point of view, they seem to have made a good choice.

Not only does he celebrate the ritual of the Mass or of other religious services, he has created his own rituals. Although not the first Pope to kiss the ground on arrival in a country (Paul VI was the first), this ritual became so expected that when he became too infirm to kiss the earth, the earth was carried to him (usually in a bowl) by representatives of the country. Just as James Brown cannot leave the stage without the cape ritual, so the earth ritual is continued wherever John Paul II goes.

However the public feel about the Pope – and opinions on his successes or failures vary enormously – his position as a star is dependent on their acceptance of his position, both as religious leader and star. His successful use of the media has meant that he has played the media at their own game and won – he is a star.

Reinvention

In 1978 he was the rugged outdoors man and the intellectual. As time passed, illness and injury weakened him. Shot by Ali Akbah on camera in St. Peter’s Square, he almost died. Despite the security risks involved, he continued with his travels and personal appearances around the world. Threats on his life have caused security to be stepped up, so that in 2000 airport-style detectors were installed around St Peter’s Square and police presence stepped up. People attending audiences, Masses and other events have to pass through the scanners – but one look at the Square shows what a security nightmare it must be, surrounded as it is by buildings, trees, hills and open spaces. Broken bones meant that the Pope no longer skied. He changed from the sportsman into the benevolent grandfather. There seems to have been more of the joining in with young people, either he had decided to be more relaxed with them or he had become adjusted to being Pope. Just as Elvis Presley had a three phase career

(hillbilly Elvis[shown in *Love me Tender*], the rocker Elvis [*Jailhouse Rock*], the Las Vegas Elvis [*Elvis: That's the Way it Is*]), so the Pope has had three phases, as in the case of Elvis Presley these phases are not what might be called “total” phases, but each phase may show something of the previous one or the next one [In Presley’s case, his 1968 comeback film *Elvis*, made as a tv special, demonstrated something of all three stages]. From the aging but strong grandfather figure, John Paul’s increasing infirmity caused by a combination of Parkinson’s Disease and various accidents and injuries, have turned him into the Church’s ‘Suffering Servant’. His frailty becomes more and more evident and yet he continues with a round of visits and events. On June 16th, 2002, he carried out the Canonisation of St. Pio of Pietrelcina in St. Peter’s Square. Temperatures in the Square reached 40C, according to Vatican sources, but it seemed even hotter. The pilgrims in the Square, many of whom had come from afar, began to collapse with heat stroke. Half-litre containers of water(specially packed and printed for the day) were handed out by the 1000+ volunteers on site, and First Aid staff were kept busy trying to rescue the sick and fainting from dense crowds. Yet the Pope continued, at times so weak that his voice failed – a voice now sometimes almost unintelligible in any language because of illness.

A Roman inhabitant told me “... *the Pope is badly managed. They should not make him do this.*” All of the Vatican staff to whom I have spoken have impressed upon me that he continues through his own volition. As long ago as 1998, I was told by a senior Vatican official that it had been suggested to the Pope that he remain in the Vatican as Popes Pius IX to Pius XII did following the loss of the Papal States. John Paul has said that he will continue for as long as he possibly can – and the next Pope can do what he wants. He believes that his continuance of the round of travel, audiences, papal Masses and events, gives strength to other elderly and/or sick people to continue with their lives. He also believes that it continues his work of evangelisation, which is the main purpose of his media presence. De Certeau [1984] wrote of the dying as people from whom society withdraws. They are placed in institutions (hospitals, homes, etc.) to die. John Paul has used his institution to continue to show his decline. He is a failing, rather than falling star, and uses even his decline and death to show his faith in another world, in an after life.

Msr. Ugo Morretti, then Director of Centro Televisivo Vaticano, told me the story of the papal visit to the Holy Land in 2000.¹⁵ When they arrived, the Pope was evidently extremely weak [which caused the CNN reporter in the broadcast I watched to comment that he did not feel the Pope would get through the afternoon, leave alone the whole arranged trip]. Halfway through the trip, the television crew were exhausted. As they boarded the plane to move from one

¹⁵ Personal interview 14th November, 2000.

place to another, they heaved a sigh of relief at the thought of air conditioning, cold drinks and a comfortable seat. Msr. Morretto relates that as he sat, hoping to doze off, he felt a tap on the shoulder. There stood the Pope, asking what they would be doing next as he wanted to talk to the journalists. Morretto suggested that perhaps His Holiness should take a rest on the bed provided on the plane, as both His Holiness and the journalists were tired, and the journalists had to file stories, etc. As they landed an hour later, His Holiness took the microphone and made an unscripted address to the journalists. At the same interview, Morretto advised that His Holiness had no scripted speeches for his trip to Egypt, but only scraps of paper with keywords in his trousers pocket. These are not the actions of a man who is a puppet of the Vatican bureaucracy. However, how long he can continue is open to question, particularly after his extreme weakness at the 16th June, 2002, canonisation ceremony, where it was evident that only his sheer doggedness got John Paul through the event.

Conclusion

John Paul II is indeed a media star of the first order if we are to use the frameworks that Morin and Dyer have suggested, but also in terms of the enormous audiences he can command. Neither Vatican documents on communication and media, nor interviews with Vatican staff have convinced me that he is subject to their control other than through the way in which RAI and CTV cut broadcasts. Even this has changed. At the Christmas 2001 *Urbe et Orbi* message, any action which required John Paul to exercise physical effort was not shown. Shots panned away to the crowds in the Square, to works of art, to the surrounding city, to aerial shots of the crowds gathered. At the June 16th Canonisation of St. Pio of Pietrelcina, the cameras were focused on the Pope for much more of the ceremony, showing him in his weakness and even evident physical distress. When, at one point, the Pope fell back into his chair, much of the crowd in the Square was distressed to the point that when First Aid people rushed forward with a stretcher to retrieve a young woman who had fainted, the word went round that they were going for the Pope.

Many of the events in which John Paul takes part are historic and have a political element – the first time a Pope had visited a communist country, for instance, or his visits to Poland, which are considered to have hastened the fall of the Berlin Wall. His visit to the Holy Land in 2000 was also considered a political visit to the extent that Msr. Morretto advised me that broadcasting companies only wished to show the Pope at ‘political’ events and not as a pilgrim (since the Pope and the Vatican wished this to be shown, it was CTV that had to film these parts of the trip, often under difficult circumstances and with no technical help from the major broadcasters). These are, however, those events that are narrated by television (as Dayan and Katz (p.32) have said), but might yet

have taken place without the presence of the media. The sacred event (Mass or other religious service) that is at the centre of the media event increasingly may be lost in the turmoil of the media presentation and of the “star”. Even for those present in St. Peter’s Square at an event, it is often mediated. Large screens are present around the Square and they show the televised version of the event (in an area of that size the Pope is often little more than a small figure on a dais in front of the Basilica). The June 16th canonisation of St. Pio of Pietrelcina was different only in that it had two stars – for much of the Ceremony of Canonisation the cameras were focused on John Paul II (whether he was actively presiding or not), but on occasion pieces of archive film of St. Pio were cut into the broadcast – evidently the large portrait of him hanging on the front of St. Peter’s was not enough. Although St. Pio is revered around the world, there was little sense of reverence amongst at least the Italians in the crowd. They watched the tv screens and occasionally glanced at the actual ceremony, but treated the event as though they were watching it at home – continuing to eat snacks (drinking water was encouraged due to the great heat), chat and answer their mobiles throughout. However, when John Paul got into his popemobile and was driven round the Square, the crowds rushed forward to attempt to get closer to him.

Perhaps using shots of the ailing, frail man who is John Paul II is an effort to show him not as a God, not as a “star” but as a man like all men. The ‘Popecentricity’, of which I wrote earlier in this paper, has its drawbacks and its pluses. In a ‘Popecentric’ church, any faults can ultimately be blamed on him, his policies and his character, despite the fact that much of the Church’s policy is decided upon and written about by others and may only be signed by him. A drawback is that the next Pope has, as Archbishop Foley said, a hard act to follow.¹⁶ Not only will the next Pope have to take on a role as Head of the Roman Catholic Church, with its evident problems, but he will have also to become a star of the media and follow the path that John Paul II has made his own.

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