

The Star-Ledger

Vestments are more than just clothes for the pope

Sunday, April 13, 2008

BY DAVID GIBSON

During Pope Benedict XVI's visit this week, the first since his election three years ago, Catholics will listen intently to what he says, and how he says it, all in hopes of figuring out if Joseph Ratzinger has indeed become a kindly German shepherd or whether he remains God's Rottweiler, one of the many monikers he earned during a long tenure as the Vatican's doctrinal watchdog.

Yet as important as Benedict's words will be in introducing the pope to an American audience that knows little about him, it may be just as important to check out what he's wearing. No, not the red Prada shoes that set tongues wagging early on in his pontificate. (Besides, the designer kicks were apparently knockoffs by the papal cobbler.)

Of greater import than Benedict's shoes or his sunglasses (rumored to be Serengetis by Bushnell) will be his choice of liturgical vestments and other papal accouterments, choices that speak volumes not only about his personal tastes but also about his vision of the church's future and its past.

With increasing regularity, Benedict has been reintroducing elaborate lace garments and monarchical regalia that have not been seen around Rome in decades, even centuries. He has presided at mass using the wide cope (a cape so ample it is held up by two attendants) and high mitre of Pius IX, a 19th-century pope known for his dim views of the modern world, and on Ash Wednesday he wore a chasuble modeled on one worn by Paul V, a Borghese pope of the 17th century remembered for censuring Galileo.

On Good Friday he donned a "fiddleback" vestment dating to the Counter-Reformation era of the 16th century, and he has used a tall gilded papal throne not seen in years. And that's not to mention the ermine-trimmed red velvet mozzetta, a shoulder cape, or the matching camauro, a Santa Claus-like cap that art students will recognize from Renaissance portraiture.

As Robert Mickens, the Rome correspondent for The Tablet of London, put it, the pope's aides have "been busy raiding the liturgical storage rooms and the Vatican museums in an attempt to return the papal liturgies to their pre-Vatican II splendor" -- a reference to the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s that ushered in reforms simplifying many church rites and scaling back grandiose vesture.

Even director Franco Zeffirelli, who staged many papal events for John Paul, has chided the new pontiff for bringing back a "showy" style of attire because it makes him seem aloof.

Now comes word that Benedict has commissioned a set of 30 new vestments modeled on those worn by the notorious Medici pope, Leo X, a corpulent, corrupt fellow who at his election famously declared, "Let us enjoy the papacy since God has given it to us."

And he proceeded to do just that, paying the bills by selling indulgences and church offices and provoking Martin Luther into nailing his 95 theses to a church door in Germany. (News leaks

about the pricey vestments irked the Vatican and have reportedly delayed their introduction until Pentecost in May, when the furor may have abated.)

So what's going on here? Church conservatives are of course ecstatic, filling the blogosphere with the kind of gushing chatter that only liturgical couture, especially of the haute variety, can inspire.

Church liberals are understandably less enthusiastic. They wonder whether these clothing choices are part of a wider campaign -- along with the restoration of the old Latin Mass and other liturgical renovations -- to turn the clock back on the Vatican II reforms.

The answer is, as always, more complex than that, and it starts with Benedict's personal esthetic -- that of a proud Bavarian who "breathed the Baroque atmosphere" as a child and still plays Mozart to relax. He speaks Latin as well as he does English, and he has always been as fastidious about his liturgical wear as he is about his doctrinal pronouncements.

John Paul II, on the other hand, was almost indifferent to garments, wearing scuffed oxblood loafers around the world and donning whatever robes his hosts had for him -- a leopard skin in Mozambique, for example, and a Jean-Charles de Castelbajac design in France.

In his memoirs, Ratzinger recalled that when he was 5, the august Cardinal Faulhaber of Munich visited their small town, arriving in a long black limousine and leaving a lasting image on an impressionable child. "With his imposing purple, he impressed me all the more, so that I said, I would like to become something like that."

Recalled his older brother Georg: "It wasn't so much the car, since we weren't technically minded. It was the way the cardinal looked, his bearing and the garments he was wearing that made such an impression on him."

Yet Benedict's sartorial choices go well beyond matters of taste. Catholicism's sacramental imagination, and the church's sacred rubrics, invest great meaning in symbols, and each retro lace surplice and gilt-trimmed mitre that Benedict dons sends a message.

"He is a very patient man, very methodical, very German, and little by little he is re-directing things," says the Rev. Guy Selvester, pastor at St. Matthew's Church in Edison and a heraldic designer who confesses to being "a papacy geek" since he was a kid.

"He is slowly trying to say that he wants to restore a particular kind of character to the liturgy."

Nervous reformers worry that this old-fashioned "character" also comes with an old-style authoritarianism, and Selvester agrees that some high-style clerics can fancy themselves churchly princes. But, he says, that is not the case with Benedict. "There is a difference between being conservative and being traditional," says Selvester.

And Benedict's choices are about tradition -- an effort, Selvester says, to "show a continuity with the entirety of the papacy. He wants to say, 'I am the successor of John Paul, Pius IX, Leo X, and Peter the Apostle.'"

Yet such an assertion is also a way for Benedict to take sides in a raging debate in Catholicism about whether and how the church can change -- not just in fashions -- and whether Vatican II marked a shift in church teaching (namely, toward a liberal view that Benedict does not favor) or whether it was a recovery of traditions that always existed and thus does not constitute a break with the past.

In an interview last week, the pope's new master of ceremonies, a tradition-minded 43-year-old Italian priest, Msgr. Guido Marini, told Catholic News Service that the increased use of older liturgical elements merely reflect "development in continuity" -- a catchphrase for those who seek a "reform of the reform" of Vatican II, as the pope has often called for. Indeed, Benedict's sartorial styles may say more about his wish to anchor the present in the past than a desire to return to a glorious history that may have been less than holy.

His larger goal in doing this is to show that the church doesn't change willy-nilly, and his catholic taste in vestments and vintage accessories is another means to that end.

Critics will note that placing the last 40 years in the context of a 2,000-year span can be a way of diminishing the import of recent changes that Benedict doesn't like, and that the pope tends to make his counterpoint by drawing on styles from the most sumptuous eras of church history. For instance, he probably won't be wearing the tunic of a Galilean fisherman anytime soon.

Moreover, Benedict's emphasis on continuity over change is undercut by the fact that there are some long-standing traditions that even he avoids. For example, the sedia gestatoria, a litter that bore popes aloft (often accompanied by ostrich plumes) like Roman emperors has likely been definitively supplanted by the popemobile. And pontiffs used to be crowned with a tall, three-ringed tiara of precious metals known as the triregnum. But Paul VI was the last pope to be crowned, in 1963, and he donated his tiara to the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, where Benedict will preside at two events next week.

Despite the fond wishes of some liturgy buffs, Father Selvester doesn't expect the pope to duck downstairs and try on the tiara. "That's not going to happen," he said with a laugh. Some traditions, it seems, even Benedict would rather forget.

David Gibson, former religion writer for The Star-Ledger, is the author of "The Rule of Benedict: Pope Benedict XVI and His Battle with the Modern World." He also wrote "The Coming Catholic Church: How the Faithful are Shaping a New American Catholicism."