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Papal scare not really a shocker

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Pope greeting Catholics. Easy access raises security questions (CNS photo).

Video images of Susanna Maiolo?s Christmas Eve lunge at Benedict XVI ? her second in as many years, and by far the bolder attempt ? certainly made for a striking bit of reality TV, Vatican-style. Yet for anyone who?s spent much time in close proximity to the pope, they weren?t really a shocker.

In comparison to presidents, prime ministers, or even rock stars, the security membrane around a pope is remarkably permeable. While it?s rare for the pope to get bowled over by someone hurling themselves at him, as happened in St. Peter?s Basilica Thursday night, that?s more a matter of luck (or providence) rather than a reflection of how thoroughly insulated he is from potential threats.

Everyone who follows the pope probably has their favorite illustrations of the light security touch; here are a couple of mine.

The first is set in Azerbaijan, where John Paul II visited in May 2002. The pope celebrated Mass in an indoor Baku sports arena. When the time came for the presentation of gifts, a man joined the line and got within ten feet or so of the pope before security personnel realized he wasn?t supposed to be there and approached him. At that stage, he lurched toward the pope and began to shout before he was wrestled away. News reports would later say the man ?rushed? the pope, though speaking as someone present that day, I can testify that this guy wasn?t ?rushing? anyone: He was on crutches.

Talking to the guy, security personnel came to the conclusion that he was harmless, if slightly unhinged, and all he wanted to do was to receive a blessing from the pope. They brought him out at the end of the Mass, announcing that this was the guy given the bum?s rush earlier, and now the pope will give him a blessing. People applauded, and it was a heart-warming scene ? though I couldn?t help thinking that such warm-and-fuzzy treatment might simply encourage people to make a dash for the pope.

My second experience comes from last October, when I was in Rome covering the Synod for Africa. Most mornings Pope Benedict attended the synod, which broke for lunch at around 12:30 pm. His car would pull up to the main door of the synod hall, which faces a parking lot adjacent to the offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. All the bishops and other synod participants have to exit the same door, so every day a large crowd of friends, drivers, secretaries and so on would bunch up in the parking lot, not to mention

enterprising reporters hoping to grab some insider scoop. We gathered near the door, maybe five feet or so from where the pope would exit, wave, and get into his car.

In theory, we were supposed to show some sort of credential to the Swiss Guards to get into that parking lot, but so many people would turn up each day just before 12:30 that they basically wave through anyone who isn?t obviously a tourist. There?s no metal detector, no bag check, nothing.

As I was standing there one day watching the pope exit, a priest who serves as private secretary to one of the cardinals inside the synod bemoaned the lack of serious screening. He leaned over and whispered, ?As far as anyone here knows, I could be packing an RPG.? (Prompting me to quip, ?Geez, in the old days the job description for a bishop?s secretary was, ?Never get between the bishop and a TV camera, and always get between the bishop and a bullet.? ? But an RPG??)

All of this, it should be stressed, is mostly the result of design, not sloth or flippancy about the physical safety of the pope. Security personnel in the Vatican are by and large sharp, professional, and deeply loyal. Yet up to now the policy has been to keep their presence light, for at least two reasons.

First, the pope is supposed to be a pastor and a shepherd of souls. Popes want to be accessible to people, and therefore tend to resist measures that would isolate them. Second, popes are also true believers, who regard their fate as ultimately in the hands of God. John Paul II, for instance, was profoundly convinced that on May 13, 1981, the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima and the day of Mehmet Ali Agca?s assassination attempt, the Virgin Mary changed the flight path of a bullet to preserve his life and ministry. Given that supernatural frame of reference, popes (and, to some extent, their advisors) tend to invest comparatively less time worrying about the details of security arrangements.

While that psychology is understandable and even noble, it also can have the effect of putting the pope at risk, as the Christmas Eve lapse illustrates.

That may be something especially worth thinking about with regard to Pope Benedict XVI, who remains in strikingly good health for a man of 82, but who is nevertheless becoming, bit by bit, more prone to exhaustion and frailty. The Vatican moved up the pope?s ?midnight Mass? this year to 10:00 pm, precisely to conserve his strength before his lengthy Urbi et Orbi blessing on Christmas Morning. Had it been Benedict with the broken leg rather than retired French Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, however, that extra two hours in bed probably wouldn?t have done him much good.

In the wake of this latest incident, in other words, there may be a growing consensus in the Vatican that the security membrane around the pope needs to become at least a little bit thicker.

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