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Frock coats and fiddle back vestments

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

John Allen reports that in a forthcoming papal equivalent of an executive order, Pope Benedict XVI will initiate a "liturgical movement" that, with unintentional irony, he terms "new" even though it is old enough to be appraised on "Antiques Road Show." Allen concludes that the pontiff, invoking the mantra of "continuity," wants to "restore what (he)? and like-minded observers believe was lost in the post-Vatican II period." In short, this is the latest move to "reform the Reform" of Vatican II.

Is there a parallel with the events that took place a century ago as the shadow of World War One fell across Europe? The last great autocrats, the lookalike cousins who ruled England, Russia, and Germany, wanted continuity as well as they struggled to restore monarchical structures that were being swept away by the incoming tide of modern times. In *George, Nicholas, and Wilhelm*, Miranda Richards describes the Kaiser's brutal striving to preserve the click heels militarism that emerged from Bismarck's uniting Germany in the previous century. Russia's Tsar Nicholas chose to ignore the modern world and the restless millions seeking better lives and more freedom, feeling that it was the assembling crowd's fault when his soldiers fired on them in his palace square. His duty, he was blindly confident, was to preserve the divine rights of emperors by exercising them constantly. He ignored the thousands of casualties as his armies were humiliated by the Japanese and when they destroyed his Pacific Fleet he ordered his Atlantic Fleet to sail to the Far East to exact revenge on what he considered a lesser nation. The Japanese sank that fleet too.

The tsar, wishing to wave away modernity, moved his family out of St. Petersburg to live at Tsarskoe Selo "in a world apart" where the tsar never spoke "of the war or the internal state of his country." He recreated the universe he loved of imperial protocol and trivial occupations while a ten foot high barbed wire fence rose around the vast compound. Such troubles as existed in Russia were caused by "workers" who had been "duped" by "the traitors and enemies of the country." The well mannered tsar let reality

drift by like a passing summer storm while his wife, Alexis, contemptuously declared that the "illiterate Russian" was simply not ready for "freedom of thought." The answer, the Romanovs were divinely certain, lay in crushing the new age and its demands and returning to the autocracy that God had placed in their hands.

After King Edward VII died in 1910, his son, George V, dismissed modern times and their complications by decreeing a retreat to the Victorian Age. To the despair of his ministers, he also concentrated on the emblems of a lost and gone way of life, sending corrective notes to politicians who entered Parliament in anything but the frock coats that had been popular in the 1890s. He forced his wife, Queen Mary, who longed for fashionable clothes, to wear "the constricting toques and bustles and corsets of a late-Victorian lady." Longing "for the certainties of his grandmother's world, he returned the court to the staidness of the 1890s."

A hundred years later, Pope Benedict XVI struggles to renew and restore the hierarchical or monarchical model of the church. Sure that the problems are not the clogging rust from the corroding hierarchical structures, he has announced the creation of a new Vatican department dedicated to tackling what he calls "a grave crisis" in which Europe and North America are facing "the eclipse of the sense of God."

Meanwhile the victims of sex abuse by clergy are the counterparts of the masses waiting for the tsar to respond to their suffering as they wait in St. Peter's Square for the pope to respond more fully and effectively to theirs. Benedict seems unsure of what to do as criticism mounts for his seemingly passive management of the problem as a German archbishop or a top Vatican official. One of the central parts of his program is the restoration of the hierarchical forms that are falling like space debris all around him. Having given Archbishop Lefebvre and his pre-Vatican II longings considerable leeway, Benedict now advocates traveling back in time to undermine Vatican II's monumental liturgical reforms, claiming that he is just restoring "continuity" with the imagined glory of a a Gone With the Wind age of Catholic life.

He is calling for fiddleback vestments instead of frock coats, and the team the Vatican has sent to investigate the American nuns -- who are a true glory of the Church -- may want them to slip into the armored suit habits of irretrievable times. Meanwhile, as victims of the sex abuse scandal still wait below his windows, weeping as uncomforted as Rachel, this week the pope made a trip to the small central Italian city of Sulmona, to venerate the relics of Pope St. Celestine V who, Catholic Culture.Com reports, resigned from the papacy five months after his election in 1294. Benedict also blessed a new fountain at the Vatican in honor of St. Joseph, to whom the pope is said to have great devotion. He also announced plans to move shortly to his summer retreat at Castel Gandolfo.

At the same time, something called "The Pope's Cologne" hit the market. It is based on the "private formula of Pope Pius IX," who reigned for what seemed like the whole 19th century, condemned everything modern, and left us with the doctrine of infallibility and the unfinished business of Vatican I. The product is described as an "aristocratic, Old World cologne with surprising freshness." No doubt the tsar used it too.

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