

Queen and pope: Like in-laws meeting for the first time

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Sep. 23, 2010 | Bulletins from the Human Side

The most striking part of the papal visit to Britain was not its regal splendor but its human poignancy. It was more touching than overwhelming to watch these still spry eighty-somethings, Queen Elizabeth II and Pope Benedict XVI, greet each other with the kind of affectionate wariness on display when, after extensive family discussions about if and when and who will sit where, prospective in-laws finally meet -- shielding their doubts about what will come of it with the practiced grace of good manners.

Here, after all, we had not only two heads of state but two heads of churches who, like on guard in-laws, remember the 500-year-old blood feud that broke the family of Roman Catholicism apart and left feelings whose bitterness has been reduced but not entirely eliminated.

Every moment and movement reflected the everybody-on-their-best-behavior tension of patriarchal encounters that are a necessary step in family mergers. Parents know, as the pope and the queen surely did, that the success of the matter in question -- marriage or ecumenical unity -- depends less on them standing in the center of the picture than on those outside the range of the camera.

The stakes are not small and the good will has been large among the theologians who have made such progress in opening Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism up to each other. It was moving to watch the stiffly on duty queen shake hands, howsoever tentatively, with the shy and still self-conscious pope. It was moving because both of them, much like about-to-be in-laws, brought the sorrows of their own families to the encounter.

For the queen, who once publicly admitted to having an *annus horribilis* -- a really bad year -- has seen the traditions of the royal family disrupted by more problems with love, estrangement, and loss than Shakespeare ever piled into a play. It is difficult for the queen to be a symbol of stability when she knows that her 'sceptred isle' may on any given day ripple with the aftershocks of royal misbehavior.

Right after the meeting, ABC News reported that Prince Charles has been eavesdropping on tourists visiting his Gloucester Castle home and that he talks to the trees in his garden to keep himself sane. Despite the crowds waving miniature Union Jacks at the queen's motorcade, a great many of her subjects are ready to dump the monarchy altogether -- just when she was getting good at it. Little that the queen does beyond the ceremonial seems to make much difference. She may ask herself: Does anybody really pay any attention to me?

Benedict's stature is slightly bent -- less from leaning on a classroom rostrum for half a century than from the burden of the sex scandals that he has not been able to shift off his shoulders in his half a decade as Pope. He knows a little about aftershocks from clerical misbehavior himself. They have occurred recently in Belgium and Germany and while in Britain he received a bulletin that the Vatican Bank is being investigated for money laundering.

It's no wonder that the pope looks up anxiously from his text as if ready to duck another blow as he confesses the church's failure to deal with the sex scandal in a sweet singsong accent and everywhere he goes he expresses sorrow, revises protocols, meets with victims, and, yet, beyond these undoubtedly sincere actions,

nothing seems to make much difference. While Catholics are not campaigning to dump the papacy -- and the pope's visit to Great Britain illustrates why the Anglican Communion could really use a pontiff -- the pope may ask himself: Does anybody really pay any attention to me?

In the pictures of their meeting, the white cassocked pope looks diffidently up at the queen as he might have at the nun who taught him in the first grade. The queen reacts with a sweetness that takes the edge off her regal restraint. Famous for her hats, she wears one that has a precipitously slanted crown -- not unlike the roof of a house that is toppling slowly into the floodwaters.

The queen's hat symbolizes better than anything else the situation in which these last, so to speak, crowned heads of Europe find themselves. The "Age of Monarchy" is over and yet both pope and queen are gamely trying to keep their hierarchical systems functioning. Its days are really over in Britain where the great rooms and castles that served as a background for the meeting of the pope and queen are familiar -- less as a sign of the monarchy's vigor than as sets for the television program *Masterpiece Theater*.

The pope, on the other hand, is driving hard to revive hierarchy as the framework of the church. That is why Benedict defends celibacy as if it were an article of the creed rather than a way of controlling the clergy, and beatifies holy people, such as Cardinal Newman: to keep the hierarchical seating arrangement -- from least holy to most holy -- intact.

The queen and the pope can tell us all about how uneasy lie the heads that wear the crowns. Their meeting was humanly touching because, in their separate ways, their struggles are humanly touching. They arose from the previous century and are trying to preserve forms that arose in centuries long before that. They may have felt like prospective in-laws to each other, unsure of whether, each family having troubles enough of its own, joining together will strengthen or burden them further.

The queen and the pope are valiant keepers of a flame of hierarchy that is flickering low. No matter what they do, they cannot seem to set that flame blazing.

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