

In wake of World Youth Day, buzz over a fashion faux pas

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 25, 2011 NCR Today

You might think commentators would have more important things to focus on in the wake of Pope Benedict XVI's recent visit to Spain for World Youth Day — such as the debate over the costs of the trip, or the questions of church/state relations it occasioned — but the buzz in both the Spanish and Italian press is instead over an alleged fashion faux pas.

To wit: Princess Letizia, wife of the heir to the Spanish throne, is being pummeled in some quarters for what she wore to an August 19 photo op with Benedict XVI and the royal family.

(Conveniently, a gallery of all the images I'm about to reference can be found here, with commentary in Italian: <http://it.lifestyle.yahoo.com/foto/letizia-di-spagna-quante-gaffes-con-il-papa--1314201540-slideshow/>)

Two points in particular have stirred scandal. First, Letizia's skirt-suit stopped short of her knees, leaving them uncovered — a salacious violation of the usual protocol for encounters with the pontiff. Second, the color of her suit was off-white, while tradition holds that only the queen of a Catholic nation is entitled to wear white while greeting the pope.

For the record, Queen Sofia wore a yellowish outfit that's been most commonly described as "mustard-colored."

Letizia (her full name is Letizia Ortiz Rocasolano) has long been a controversial figure in royalist circles in Spain, as a former TV celebrity who doesn't really have a claim to noble birth. (Apparently she's descended, on the side of her paternal grandfather, from families which were once Constables of Castille, but that hasn't been enough to satisfy her most snooty critics.)

By the way, this isn't the first that her fashion choices for papal encounters have brought blowback. She was also criticized for wearing white during a November 2010 meeting with Benedict at Santiago de Compostela, and later during that same trip, she was photographed sitting next to the pontiff in a gray outfit that left her knees completely uncovered.

If you don't believe that people actually get upset over such things, just hop onto the Spanish version of Google, type in "letizia" and "papa", and you'll find endless analyses.

Interestingly, when Letizia met John Paul II in the Vatican in 2004, she was a model of sartorial sobriety: Black full-length dress, with a covered head. That opens up a whole new line of inquiry: Is the Spanish princess expressing a preference among pontiffs, based on her fashion choices? Or is this simply a case of, "When in Rome ...?"

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