

An Audience with the Pope

The weekly general audiences of Pope John Paul II are stirring charismatic experiences to some, vivid multilingual happenings to others. The first non-Italian pope since the Renaissance and the first Polish pope in history, John Paul has in a few months developed a new framework for his periodic encounters with the crowds that flock to the Vatican to obtain the papal blessing.

While only members of the world hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church, heads of state and other prominent people are likely to be granted a private audience with the pope, anyone, Catholic or non-Catholic, pilgrim or tourist, can attend group audiences. A lucky minority will be greeted personally by the Pope.

These audiences, over the years, have been handled very differently by different popes. Parts of the ceremony have been arrived at through evolution. Centuries ago, according to the British historian and theologian R.S. Grauer, in a series of articles entitled "The Religious Origins of Physical Movement" the entire procedure was reversed. There was at that time an early Pope Peter who had been in his youth a player in a Commedia Del Arte troupe that toured the Italian provinces. Some great misfortune had caused him to turn to the church and leave his original calling. He rose through the ranks eventually becoming Pope in his great age. But he had never quite put away his love of theatrics. He is credited with two important changes during his reign. Not content with the somber black cloth of his predecessors he looked to the east for elaborate brocades and outsize headdresses and he began what was then referred to as "An audience for the Pope".

Once each month he would arrange performances for a select and invited audience at which he would do mime sequences of a historical nature remembered from his youth which he clearly still practiced, and slight of hand tricks. This Pope Peter was extremely popular with the people and we are given to understand that the word popular itself was coined from the root word pope to signify his wide acceptance.

At his death both the occasion and its title had clearly to be altered. His successor, having no theatrical bent but wishing to keep contact with the people, determined that since he had no way of entertaining the people, the people would entertain him. During his reign and during the reigns of a number of popes who came after him the ceremony became known as "An audience of the Pope". The Pope would serve as audience for performing artists of all sorts who were brought together several times during the year for festivals. These festivals would include amateurs as well as professionals and another new word was coined to refer to these occasions. A weeks worth of mixed bills for the Pope became known as a popourri from the root words pope and pure or puree.

These showings eventually were thought too frivolous and of a secular nature by the more conservative element of the church. A movement toward reform eventually generated the selection of a more moderate Pope who did away with the festivals of performance substituting in their place an occasion newly renamed "An audience with the Pope". Although the nature of that occasion has altered a number of times over the years the name has remained constant from that time. The only remnants of the early performance festivals that appear to have spanned the decades are the command performances for the Queen of England and our own White House entertainments.

An audience with the Pope as it was first designed by the new conservative Pope, also a Pope Peter as it happened, was a somber affair in which the Pope met with a handful of people at one sitting and discussed clerical matters. This, however proved to be very limiting because unlike the current Pope John Paul, not every Pope spoke many languages. Many Popes spoke only Italian and Latin and when receiving audiences of different nationalities, a form of communication had to be established, especially as travel facilities improved between countries of the world.

The Pope Dance evolved from a combination of words, gestures, some mime and eventually larger and more varied movements, as a response to the language barrier between the Pope and a new, more mobile flock of travelling communicants. The person or persons having attained an audience with the Pope were responsible for illustrating or enhancing their verbal concerns with an adequate gestural or movement vocabulary.

People were seen by the Pope singly, in pairs, or in small groups. Common usage of words such as solo, duet, trio, quartet, etc. designating the size of a Pope Dance group date from this papal period coming from both the Latin and the Italian.

If the Pope clearly understood the nature of the information implicit in the rendering of the Pope Dance he would nod, smile, and, or, tap his foot in time with the rhythm of the movement being shown. If two or more of these affirmations were clearly visible during an audience, the Pope Dance which had engendered them would gain a certain notoriety amongst the lay public. The term Pop Dance originally applied to a Pope Dance which had gained the Popes wholehearted approval during an audience and become popular with the public because of it. Many well known dances such as the Rhumba and the Twist were originally Pope Dances. Also, a favorite song of the period which is still sung today, "O Solo Mio" is said to have been

written about the Pope's overwhelming response to a singularly well performed and moving Pope Dance.

It was not unusual for the Pope to request that the Pope Dance be repeated. Occasionally this was for his own pleasure but more often because he had not clearly divined the essence or nature of the movement used. The Pope Dance would then be performed as many times as was necessary for the Pope to clearly understand the information before him. When these multiple showings of the same Pope Dance afforded the Pope no new enlightenment he would shake his head no. He would shake his head no until finally the communicants were forced to leave. These became known as the Pope's No's, and were a badge of dishonor not worn lightly.

During World War II these audineces were abandoned in favor of a more direct means of communication. Times were hard and events moved at a much greater speed. It was thought that the time had come to separate movement and narrative. Narrative seemed to function so much more expediently in verbal or written material and movement clearly had a meaning all its own. The Pope returned to verbal encounters with the communicants and began to use translators when ever necessary. The audience with the Pope that we know today is the child of those hard times.

The only other words known to have evolved from early audiences with the Pope are pop-eyed, a condition attributed to the Pope after having watched too great a number of Pope Dances; pop corn, a small dry food stuff, pale in color, invented by a chef at the Vatican to resemble a pasta, for the Pope to be able to ingest without notice during long showings; and poppy-cock, a term used by the Pope to describe a great many of the Pope Dances that he had to sit through, and coming from the Latin pappa or father, and cacare...to defecate.