How to Sell a Better Pope

Tips for the holy handlers

Lisa Miller
NEWSWEEK
From the magazine issue dated May 25, 2009

I say this with respect: Pope Benedict XVI has a public-relations problem. You need only remember the 2000 visit of John Paul II to Jerusalem—which earned wall-to-wall cable coverage and produced the unforgettable image of the frail pope praying by the Western Wall—to know it's true. Pope Benedict, by contrast, visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial last week and in so doing turned what should have been a moment of transcendent grief into a small international brouhaha because he did not refer to his own German past and appeared to some in the Israeli press to be insensitive to the fates of 6 million Jews. Otherwise, Benedict's Holy Land visit was largely ignored by the U.S. media. Benedict makes international news only when he does something thoughtless (like "reconciling" with a Holocaust-denying bishop) or when he fumbles in public, as he did on the plane to Cameroon in March when he awkwardly noted that AIDS "cannot be overcome by the distribution of prophylactics; on the contrary, they increase it." This remark, though in keeping with his theology, reverberated in the media echo chamber for a week—overshadowing other stops that might have served him better, such as meeting with representatives of Cameroon's Muslim community and a mass for as many as a million people in Angola. Benedict will never be John Paul, but why don't he and his people do a better job—to be perfectly crass about it—marketing their message?

Pope watchers answer this question in a number of ways. The pope is old, they say. "Imagine your grandfather or great-grandfather running a corporation," says James Martin, who works at the Jesuit magazine America. "He's shy," offers George Weigel, the papal biographer who is also a newsweek contributor. "He also has a sense that the word of truth should have its own effect." Weigel adds that Benedict's predilection for scholarly introspection contributes to a management vacuum in which one department does not know what the other is doing; this is exacerbated by the conviction within the Curia that "no news is good news." Others criticize the Vatican itself, the structure of which is too entrenched and medieval to react to the realities of the 24-hour news cycle. (The Vatican Press Office closes for the day at 2:30.)

These explanations may be true, but they're insufficient. No one makes excuses for Rupert Murdoch because he's 78. Benedict is the leader of a billion Roman Catholics. For two millennia the Catholic Church has arguably been the single most potent influence on Western culture. It has done great wrong, but it has also given us art and music, theology and philosophy, hospitals and universities, ethical approaches to some of the most complex social problems of our time. Why should a 21st-century pope not run a responsive and transparent communications operation? I asked a number of public-relations experts how they might advise the pope to improve his public image.

Get better handlers. This was the recommendation of Richard Wolff, a managing partner at Kreab Gavin Anderson consultants. "Maybe you need a broader and more effective surrogate structure when you have a leader who is less comfortable with the grand stage." Insiders say the head of the Vatican Press Office, a priest named Federico Lombardi, is both overworked (he also runs Vatican Radio) and too removed from the decision makers. Thus he can't forestall crises—he can only mop up afterward. Rumors abound that Lombardi is about to be replaced; these he deflected in a recent interview with Zenit, a Catholic news service. "I have done this work with good will, and I will do it until they say otherwise," he said.
Tell the story of the growing, vibrant global church. Susan King, who runs communications at the Carnegie Corporation, believes there's a lot of good news to share: "Africa seems to me to be a story of the future, a story of tomorrow." Don't make big international trips the occasion for intense cerebral debates, she says. "These are moments to celebrate ... These are times to put into the public square the incredible values of the church."

Reposition the past. It's hard to get beyond the "God's Rottweiler" label, but Matthew Harrington, president of Edelman public relations, suggests that the Vatican talk up Benedict's tenure as a professor at German universities during the 1960s. "He was known as this incredibly dynamic, vibrant, intellectual, open-minded individual." Harrington recommends that the pope convene "an Aspen Institute–like event," in which he shows his openness to opposing points of view.

Be yourself. Benedict got good reviews during his trip to New York City last year largely because he allowed the world to see his best side: gentle, compassionate and intellectually rigorous. He spoke about the sex-abuse crisis; he had a moving, unannounced meeting with some of the victims. "If people like you better, you can get a hell of a lot more done," says Howard Bragman, a Los Angeles publicist. Obviously, being pope is not a popularity contest; Benedict has long seen his job as pastoring the global church, not pleasing the global media. But as recent months show, his indifference to his public image only hurts his cause.

*Miller is Newsweek's Religion Editor.*

URL: http://www.newsweek.com/id/197352

© 2009