

## 'Selfies' and our common courtesy

Dec 15 , 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

These words are likely to appear in print on Sunday, December 15. As I write them, however, I find myself undeniably stuck in Friday, December 13. Late Friday morning, to be exact. My campus bell to mark the end of the third period will ring at any minute now. It is nearly 11 o'clock.

I've just checked the news. I still cannot find an apology from Washington.

Much can happen in 48 hours. There are times in life when much should happen in 48 hours.

By today, Sunday, President Obama probably will have apologized for the "selfie" he took with two other world leaders during memorial services for the deceased icon of freedom and human dignity, Nelson Mandela. If he has not yet done so, Mr. Obama should be ashamed of himself a second time. The same holds true for the premiers of Denmark and Great Britain, Helle Thorning-Schmidt and David Cameron, respectively.

As I write this morning and look at a crystal ball before me, what do I see? I see the president and the others in that infamous picture recognizing their folly, saying they are sorry, and expressing appropriate regret.

I admit, however, that my track record as a fortune-teller is far from impressive. How can I say what will happen?

Presumably, we have all seen the picture. Three famous folks are frolicking in their seats in the middle of a great crowd at what was supposed to be the solemn farewell for Nelson Mandela. President Obama is there helping the Danish premier to steady her camera. David Cameron is leaning against her shoulder to better position his mug for the shot, the three of them quite frankly reminding me of students doing the very same thing at university graduation ceremonies while distinguished guests or educators drone on from microphones down below.

To her credit, First Lady Michelle Obama wins points on this one. She kept free of the revelry, and in the picture is seen paying attention to the ceremonies on the stage before her. She is doing what she is supposed to be doing. Conscious of it or not, she was setting a good example for others to follow.

One of my mother's sayings to us as kids had to do with stones and glass. "Don't throw stones at others if you live in a glass house," she advised. How many of us can claim to have never embarrassed ourselves with a camera? So, let's not go overboard here about the "selfie."

I mentioned the graduation ceremony issue above, the point about students chatting and taking "selfies" when they should be showing respect for what is happening before their eyes on a stage a few feet away. My view won't win me any friends, but I call that rude behavior.

Making this comparison between the shenanigans of college students and what happened at the Mandela memorial with the president of the United States displaying what many will see as a shocking lack of taste, if not outright disrespect, is perhaps off target. To be valid, comparisons must be balanced, must fit into the same circle of reason.

Students of course are not totally at fault. They learn decorum from what they observe around them. I've written in the past of my unhappiness at faculty meetings and sessions of a campus-wide faculty senate, both of which student representatives attend, when colleagues openly carry on running conversations with each other, correct homework or stare into laptops and answer e-mail, check Facebook pages, or type "Bob Dylan" into search engines.

Like many of us in life, the president of the United States stumbles here onto that bothersome and nagging question of the meaning of a role model.

We may not like it, and we may not always be aware of it, but some of us are fated to be in positions of authority, and I mean authority with a small "a." We need not be important in the public eye, like Mr. Obama. Ordinary timber though we are, people may still look to us to be a certain way in our behavior so that they can live up to the expectations they have of themselves. When we goof, we not only disappoint ourselves. We disappoint them, too.

That is the brunt of what went wrong here with a "selfie" in the hands of a good man and a good president. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

## Talking points :

1. This column is about the "selfie" that President Obama took of himself and two other world leaders during the memorial service for noted South African freedom icon Nelson Mandela last week. Did you see this picture? If so, did it have an effect upon you?
2. The question of politeness and respect for the feelings of others is sometimes difficult to handle. Have you ever felt that talking and laughing during ceremonies or meetings, or taking pictures during public gatherings while others are talking, is rude?
3. President Obama may have apologized for his behavior by the time this column appears in The China Post. Nevertheless, do you agree or disagree with the idea of a president of a country making an apology for personal behavior?

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