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Remembering Paul VI, the superhuman pope

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 8, 2008 All Things Catholic

A two-part dramatic miniseries on Pope Paul VI is slated for Italian national TV this fall, marking the 30th anniversary of his death in August 1978. *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's main daily, reports that eight million Euro are being pumped into the project, which is hardly surprising given the mammoth ratings success of earlier miniseries about the popes between whom Paul VI was sandwiched: John XXIII and John Paul II.

Still, the production company is worried, conceding that Paul VI was not a "popular personality" like the other two pontiffs. As a result, unlike the previous bio-epics, which were simply named "John XXIII" and "John Paul II," this time around the producers plan to append an adjective to the pope's name in the title -- otherwise, they fret, the program might not seem "intriguing" enough for the mass market. The problem is that they have yet to settle on the right modifier to capture the essence of Pope Paul, as well as the interest of couch potatoes everywhere.

As fate would have it, Pope Benedict XVI may have inadvertently come to the rescue during his Angelus address last Sunday. Reflecting on the anniversary of Paul VI's death, which fell on Wednesday, Benedict wielded a striking adjective indeed in characterizing his predecessor, who led the church through the storms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and its aftermath: "Superhuman."

"Bit by bit," Benedict said, "as our view of the past expands and our understanding deepens, the merit of Paul VI in presiding over the council, leading it happily to its conclusion, and then governing the turbulent post-conciliar phase, appears ever greater -- indeed, I would say, almost superhuman."

Thus RAI, the Italian national TV network, may have its title: *Paolo VI: Il papa sovrumano* ("Paul VI, The Superhuman Pope.")

The term seems a fitting act of justice on behalf of Paul VI, who began to be enveloped in neglect almost from the moment of his death. Consider that when John Paul II died, *The New York Times* devoted a special section to the pope, including an obituary of some 13,500 words; when Paul VI died, his passing merited a lone obit of scarcely more than 1,000 words, which began by characterizing Paul as "not naturally gregarious and innovative" and a "consummate bureaucrat."

The past two weeks have provided fresh confirmation of the point. Last week's 40th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, Paul's encyclical reiterating the church's ban on contraception, triggered a predictable flood of

commentary (in which I participated, penning an Aug. 3 op/ed for the *Times* at the editors' request); the 30th anniversary of Paul's death this week has been met with a fairly deafening silence. In the popular mind, Paul's pontificate has essentially been reduced to its most controversial moment.

Such summary dismissals are terribly unfair to a pope who was among the most consequential, and, in many ways, most admirable Catholic personalities of the 20th century.

Giovanni Battista Montini, who became Paul VI upon his election to the papacy in 1963, was a deeply refined soul. A diplomat by training, Paul VI was fascinated by the church's relationship with culture, including modern science, philosophy, and the arts; in his programmatic encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, released on Aug. 6, 1964, exactly 14 years before his death on the very same date, Paul said he felt a "vocation" to dialogue between the church and the world.

If the key word of the papacy of John XXIII was *aggiornamento*, bringing the church up to date, and that of John Paul II *evangelization*, boldly urging Catholicism to "set out into the deep," Paul VI's leitmotif was very much *dialogue* -- gentle, respectful conversation, never vacillating about the truth of the Christian message, but always open to what he called "the elements of truth in the opinions of others."

Ecclesiam Suam, where the word "dialogue" appears 67 times, ranks among the neglected treasures of recent papal teaching. (One wishes it would draw even a fraction of the scrutiny devoted to *Humanae Vitae*.) In it, Paul VI laid out his vision of the church's engagement with humanity.

"Theoretically speaking, the church could set its mind on reducing its relationships to a minimum, endeavoring to isolate itself from dealings with secular society; just as it could set itself the task of pointing out the evils that can be found in secular society, condemning them and declaring crusades against them," Paul wrote. "So also it could approach so close to secular society as to strive to exert a preponderant influence on it, or even to exercise a theocratic power over it, and so on."

"But it seems to us," Paul said, using the customary royal plural of the era, "that the relationship of the church to the world, without precluding other legitimate forms of expression, can be represented better in a dialogue."

Paul described this dialogue in terms of four qualities:

- Clarity: "Every angle" of one's language should be reviewed to ensure that it's "understandable, acceptable, and well-chosen";
- Meekness: "Dialogue is not proud, it is not bitter, it is not offensive. Its authority is intrinsic to the truth it explains, to the charity it communicates, to the example it proposes; it is not a command, it is not an imposition. It is peaceful; it avoids violent methods; it is patient; it is generous."
- Trust: One should have confidence "not only in the power of one's words, but also in an attitude of welcoming the trust of the interlocutor. Trust promotes confidence and friendship. It binds hearts in mutual adherence to the good which excludes all self-seeking."
- Pedagogical prudence: "Prudence strives to learn the sensitivities of the hearer and requires that we adapt ourselves and the manner of our presentation in a reasonable way, lest we be displeasing and incomprehensible."

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The spirit of dialogue, Paul wrote, is friendship and service.

"Before speaking, it is necessary to listen, not only to a man's voice, but to his heart," the pope said. "A man must first be understood; and, where he merits it, agreed with. In the very act of trying to make ourselves pastors, fathers and teachers of men, we must make ourselves their brothers."

Alas, little of this largeness of spirit seems to be remembered today, either in internal Catholic discussion or in those secular realms Paul VI so longed to engage.

Among Catholics, Paul VI looms as the great exception to the normal tendency to put a positive spin on anything a pope says or does. In Paul's case, everybody seems to lead with their favorite beef. Liberals can't forgive Paul for not being John XXIII, forever lamenting his rulings on birth control and women's ordination. Conservatives won't forgive Paul for not being John Paul II, deriding his handling of liturgical reform and his *Ostpolitik*, a policy of dialogue with Socialist states. Self-styled experts often characterize Paul as a tragic or sad figure, which usually functions as an indirect way of minimizing his accomplishments.

(At the far edge of traditionalist Catholic sentiment, the negative assessment of Paul VI shades off into the truly hysterical. I recently came across a group of Fatima devotees, for example, convinced that Paul VI was secretly deposed in 1972 and replaced by an impostor, because otherwise there's no way to explain the abominations committed in his name. The group operates a Web site displaying side-by-side photos of the pontiff and his alleged doppelganger, along with voice prints, in an effort to document what they call "the deception of the century.")

In secular circles, Paul VI simply never caught on. Here's an anecdote that makes the point. During a CNN production meeting last April to plan our coverage of Benedict XVI's Mass at Yankee Stadium, I suggested that we roll footage of the first papal visit to the home of the Bronx Bombers -- Paul VI in 1965. Can't be done, I was told, because the run-down for the show was already full. Anyway, a young production assistant chimed in, probably fresh from a half-hour of research on Google, "Wasn't he that boring pope between the two interesting ones?"

That may be the judgment of the last forty years, but one doubts it will stand. The French Dominican theologian Yves Congar once predicted as much: "With time, Paul VI will be appreciated," Congar said.

In the meantime, it's an interesting question why Paul has been so often overlooked. There are many possible answers, but here I'll offer just one hypothesis.

In an era in which ideological tribalism has become the dominant mode of social organization, even within the church, it seems to me that Paul VI suffered the fate of anyone not clearly identified with a particular tribe. Because he tried to see the wisdom in all points of view, he had no natural constituency, no "base," to use today's political jargon, and thus no lobby to ride to his rescue when times got tough.

Paul's willingness to resist quick judgment earned him the moniker of the "Hamlet pope," but those who knew Paul insist it wasn't spinelessness or angst, but rather a keen sense of the insufficiency of simple answers.

Paul VI, in other words, was animated by the deeply Catholic instinct to seek both/and solutions to what others saw as either/or problems. The price he paid is that he was never a hero, either in his own time or now, to those who think in either/or terms; he was, instead, a prophet of that "not too numerous center" famously described by the late Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan.

In many ways it was a thankless role, and Paul's fidelity to it over fifteen turbulent years can only seem ? well, in a word, superhuman. Let's hope someone at RAI is paying attention.

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Here's the full text of what Pope Benedict XVI had to say about Paul VI during his Aug. 3 Angelus addressed, delivered in Bressanone, in northern Italy, where Benedict is passing a couple of weeks of vacation. Benedict spoke in Italian; the following is my translation.

"Now, dear friends, I invite you to foster together with me a devoted and filial memory of the Servant of God Pope Paul VI, since, three days from now, we will recall the 30th anniversary of his death. It was in fact the evening of August 6, 1978, when he rendered his spirit to God; that evening was the feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus, the mystery of divine light that always exercised a singular fascination upon his soul. Such a supreme Pastor of the Church, Paul VI guided the People of God toward the contemplation of the face of Christ, Redeemer of humanity and Lord of history. It was precisely the loving orientation of the mind and heart towards Christ which was one of the cardinal points of the Second Vatican Council, a fundamental attitude which my venerated predecessor John Paul II inherited and re-launched in the Great Jubilee of 2000. Christ is always at the center of everything; at the center of Sacred Scripture and tradition, at the heart of the church, of the world and of the entire universe."

"Divine Providence called Giovanni Battista Montini from the Chair of Milan to that of Rome in the most delicate moment of the Council -- when the intuition of Blessed John XXIII was at risk of not taking form. How can we not give thanks to the Lord for his fertile and courageous pastoral activity? Bit by bit, as our view of the past expands and our understanding deepens, the merit of Paul VI in presiding over the Council, leading it happily to its conclusion, and then governing the turbulent post-conciliar phase, appears ever greater -- indeed, I would say, almost super-human. We can truly say, with the apostle Paul, that in him the grace of God 'was not in vain' (1 Cor 15:10); it made the most of his obvious gifts of intelligence and his passionate love for the church and for humanity. As we give thanks to God for the gift of this great pope, let us commit ourselves to treasuring his teachings."

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