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Pope John's Anniversary

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NCR Today

Today, the feast of St. Charles Borromeo, marks a very special, and very telling, anniversary for it was on this feast day in 1958 that Angelo Roncalli was crowned Pope John XXIII. Pope John remains the best loved Pope of recent times, even if his memory has been somewhat overshadowed by the long and undeniably significant pontificate of Pope John Paul II.

The coronation itself, and the date he chose, are instructive. Pope John, like Pope Benedict, had a certain love for the Baroque ceremonies of the Church. He loved the pomp and circumstance. Those who see him as a champion of reform in the Church are correct to do so, but he was nobody's liberal and those who cast him in such a light misunderstand the man and his sense of the Church.

St. Charles Borromeo had a special place in Pope John's heart. As a young church historian, Roncalli had edited the acta from Borromeo's diocesan visitations. He admired the way this reforming archbishop had implemented the decrees of the Council of Trent and he no doubt saw in him a model for the kind of reform he hoped would issue from the Second Vatican Council. As Pope Benedict has reminded us, a hermeneutic of reform entails points of both continuity and discontinuity, and if Pope John were here to comment, I think he would agree.

What Pope John understood, better than some of his acolytes and some of his detractors, is that the traditions of the Church can be powerfully modern, not in the Enlightenment, Cartesian sense of the term, but in the sense that the Gospel is no more the personal property of the 16th century than it is of the 1950s. He called the Council to bring the Church up to date, but he looked back to Borromeo to see what that process looks like. On this day, we can do worse than to do the same.

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