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Remembering Paul VI

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 6, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

I remember the day well. It was August 6, 1978, feast of the Transfiguration and my Uncle Bob?s birthday. I was driving down Farmington Avenue in West Hartford, Connecticut on my way to work.

The radio came on with the announcement that Pope Paul VI had just died at Castel Gandolfo. I stopped at the Church of St. Thomas where they were getting ready for a Vigil Mass and went into the rectory to tell the priest, who has not heard the news. I lit a candle.

Pope Paul VI was the only Pope I had ever known. He had been elected when I was one year old. I felt the way my mother described feeling when she got the news that Franklin Roosevelt had died: It was not just the person who had died, it seemed like the papacy or the presidency had died. We had never had to disassociate the office from the person.

Regarding the papacy, there is a poignant truth in the conflation of the man with the office. Our faith is an incarnational, historical faith, rooted in a specific historical claim: The tomb was empty. The witnesses to that empty tomb were the apostles, and through the centuries, their successors have carried on the faith, passing it on from generation to generation. I have always wondered how those who do not see the importance of the apostolic succession explain their commitment to Christianity. Is one a Christian because there happened to be Bibles lying about in the place of one?s birth? No. The faith is handed on from one person to another, not by a text, important though that text is.

Paul VI could scarcely have been more maligned during his lifetime. He had the unenviable task of implementing a Council. The ambiguities contained within the texts as a means of achieving consensus had to be resolved. His goal was to keep everyone on board and rowing in the same direction, at a time when many people wanted to row in different directions. In his final year, the murder of his friend Aldo Moro haunted him. He seemed like a man unmourned at the time, but I mourned him. He was the Pope, the only Pope I had known. Even though I had never seen him in person, I felt like he was my Pope. I felt a personal connection and so his death was like a physical blow.

History is already being kinder to the memory of Pope Paul VI than were his contemporaries. A few years after his death, bumper stickers appeared in Rome saying, ?Paul come back ? All is forgiven!? His apostolic exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi remains a great read and I submit that even the controversial Humane Vitae reads better with each passing year. His speeches at the closing of Vatican II were awesome. Most of all, with the exception of the Lefebvrists, he kept the Church together. That was no small feat at a time of enormous change both within and without the Church. He was never loved as Good Pope John was, nor did he redefine the role of the papacy as significantly as Pope John Paul II, but I suspect that history will record his papacy as the outstanding papacy of the twentieth century.

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