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Popes of the 20th century

Richard McBrien | Aug. 9, 2010 Essays in Theology

When I was a lot younger, we assumed that all popes, with the exception of the infamous Alexander VI, were great popes, like the ones who reigned during the 20th century.

Leo XIII, who died in 1903 after a 25-year pontificate, was known to us as the author of the landmark social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, in 1891. We didn't know much else about him, particularly his ten encyclicals on the Rosary, his efforts to recover the Papal States, or his declaration in 1896 that Anglican orders were "absolutely null and utterly void."

We knew that Pope Pius X was a canonized saint, but what we didn't know was that he had waged an often cruel campaign against Catholic theologians, biblical scholars, and church historians, lumping them all under the umbrella of Modernism -- a campaign from which the Catholic Church did not begin to recover until the pontificate of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council a half-century later.

We also knew nothing of the pope's refusal in 1910 to grant an audience to ex-President Theodore Roosevelt because Mr. Roosevelt was scheduled to speak at the Methodist church in Rome, or his disapproval of trade unions that were not exclusively Catholic.

We heard little or nothing about one of the 20th century's truly good popes, Benedict XV. Although his pontificate was overshadowed by the First World War, during which he was vilified by both sides, it was Pope Benedict who called a halt to the internecine warfare within the Church that had raged throughout the reign of his predecessor, Pius X.

Needless to say, we were not informed that the Muslim Turks had erected a statue to Benedict XV in Istanbul that hailed him as "the great pope of the world tragedy ... the benefactor of all people, irrespective of nationality or religion."

I recall the papal blessing on my grandmother's dining room wall that my priest-uncle had obtained for her. It had a photo of Pope Pius XI on it, from whom the blessing was derived.

I knew nothing, however, of Pius XI's obsessive fear of Communism, so intense, in fact, that he had signed agreements or concordats with two of the most notorious Fascist leaders of the time, Italy's Benito Mussolini and Germany's Adolf Hitler, and gave his full support to another, Spain's Francisco Franco.

Neither did we know much about his encyclical *Mortalium animos* in 1928 that forbade any Catholic involvement in ecumenical conferences. But, of course, that policy represented the conventional wisdom of the Catholic Church at the time. Protestants were heretics, and any form of cooperation with them implicitly gave aid and comfort to the enemy.

On the other hand, those of us in Catholic schools, and especially in seminaries, had known of, and extolled, Pius XI's social encyclical, *Quadragesimo anno*, issued in 1931, on the fortieth anniversary of Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum*

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It was in that encyclical that the pope introduced one of Catholic social thought's most important principles, the principle of subsidiarity, which holds that nothing is to be done by a higher agency that can be done as well, if not better, by a lower agency.

In recent years Catholic theologians have applied this principle to the Church itself in order to challenge the growing trend toward recentralization of authority in the Vatican.

The pope of my youth was Pius XII. Catholics assumed that, soon after his death, he would be canonized a saint, so deeply ingrained by then was the intimate connection between the papacy and sanctity.

We knew nothing, of course, of the strong influence that Sister Pascalina played in Pius XII's pontificate, so strong, in fact, that she had cardinals quaking in their watered silk, so strong indeed that she earned the nickname, *La Popessa*.

And so resented was her influence that, immediately after Pius XII's death, the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Domenico Tardini, expelled Sister Pascalina from the papal apartment and sent her into the piazza to hail a taxi.

We also knew nothing of the controversy that would becloud the memory of Pius XII and remove him, at least for now, from consideration for eventual canonization, namely, his alleged silence during the Holocaust of the Second World War period when six million Jews were sent to their deaths by the Nazis.

At the same time, we sensed that Pius XII prepared the way for Pope John XXIII and Vatican II with his two encyclicals in 1943, *Divino afflante Spiritu*, on the renewal of Catholic biblical studies, and *Mystici Corporis*, on the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, and in 1947, *Mediator Dei*, which promoted liturgical renewal.

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