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Popes of the 20th Century: Paul VI

Richard McBrien | Aug. 23, 2010 Essays in Theology

Pope Paul VI is a mixed figure in modern papal history. Conservative Catholics, who would ordinarily be favorable to just about every pope because of the central place the papacy occupies in the life of the Church, have reviled his memory ? comparing him in a highly unfavorable way with their favorite pope of all time, John Paul II, whom they now refer to as John Paul the Great.

More objective commentators contrast the two popes? styles. John Paul II rarely, if ever, had a doubt about the validity of his opinions, while Paul VI was almost always in doubt. And this state of doubt often got him into trouble.

Indeed, Pope John XXIII, who had placed Archbishop Montini at the top of his first batch of cardinals, referred to his eventual successor as a "Hamlet" of "to be or not to be" fame.

At the Second Vatican Council, for example, Montini ? now Pope Paul VI ? refused to honor the wishes of the assembled bishops, including the influential Cardinal Suenens of Belgium, who urged him to declare John XXIII a saint then and there. The pope resisted the proposal because he thought that it would reflect badly on his own mentor, Pius XII.

Instead he announced the initiation of procedures looking toward the canonization of both John XXIII and Pius XII. We now know how ill-conceived that linkage was. John XXIII has since been beatified, but Pius XII?s cause continues to languish.

Paul VI was also so worried about the concerns of the defeated minority regarding the council?s teaching on collegiality that he authorized an "Explanatory Note" to be appended to the third chapter of the council?s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (also known by its Latin title, *Lumen gentium*) to reassure conservatives that nothing in the document detracted from the supreme authority of the pope.

The conservatives were ecstatic. Cardinal Siri of Genoa spoke for many of them: "Everything is all right! The Holy Spirit has entered the council. ... The pope has dug in his heels."

By contrast the progressive majority of council fathers went home after the third session thoroughly discouraged and demoralized.
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On the last day of the session, wrote John O?Malley, S.J., in his book *What Happened at Vatican II*, "Paul?s face was grim as he was carried out of the basilica through row upon row of bishops, who applauded perfunctorily or, in some cases, not at all. ... No one doubted that the week [known to many as "black week"] had seriously damaged the relationship between the pope and the assembly."
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Just three-and-a-half years later Paul VI would ignore the recommendations of his own Pontifical Commission on Birth Control and reaffirm the church?s official teaching that birth control by artificial means was always a mortal sin.

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Many believe that the pope had been frightened into this stance by representatives of the minority view who had warned him that if he changed the teaching on contraception the credibility of the papal magisterium itself would collapse.
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And so it did, but not because he *changed* the teaching but because he *failed* to change it!
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Paul VI was so taken aback by the unfavorable reaction to *Humanae vitae*, his encyclical on birth control, that he never published another encyclical during the ten years remaining in his pontificate.
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Unfortunately his "Hamlet" ways continued well into his pontificate. Nine years after his election Paul VI wrote: "Perhaps the Lord called me to this service not because I have any aptitude for it, or so I can govern and save the Church in its present difficulties, but so I can suffer something for the Church so that it will be clear that it is the Lord, and not anyone else, who guides and saves it."
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And yet Paul VI proved also to be a good pope, if not an outstanding one. He continued the Second Vatican Council begun by his predecessor, John XXIII; carried forward the revision of Canon Law; and worked tirelessly for the promotion of peace and justice in the world as well as the unity of the church.
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But he had the unhappy task of trying to implement the reforms wrought by Vatican II ? especially those pertaining to the liturgy ? without provoking a schism within the Catholic Church.
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He established several post-conciliar commissions and authorized the use of the vernacular in the Mass and the sacraments. He approved a new Order of the Mass in 1969, infuriating conservatives who mistakenly thought that the Roman Missal of Pius V could never be replaced.
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Paul VI would have been appalled by John Paul II?s and Benedict XVI?s approval of two separate liturgical rites in the Roman Catholic Church.

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