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Defending Paul VI

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 26, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Father Richard McBrien?s comments on Pope Paul VI [1]refresh the familiar view that Paul was a Hamlet-like figure, torn by the winds of change and reaction, too conciliatory towards the ?defeated? minority views of the conservatives at Vatican II, a champion of justice and peace but also of traditional views on human sexuality.

McBrien writes, ?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.? This was not only an unhappy task, it was a large one and a uniquely papal one. The papacy exists to guarantee the unity of the Church. Keeping everyone on board after the Council, preventing schisms, was a tall order and one that was largely achieved by Pope Paul. Apart from the Lefebvrists and a few similarly disaffected groups on the left, there were no schisms.

Implementing a Council is exceedinly difficult. The documents always reflect compromise, and compromise permits people of differing viewpoints to highlight those parts of the texts that agree with their positions. Certainly, curial conservatives were able to frustrate the implementation of the Fifth Lateran Council in a way they were not able to frustrate the implementation of Vatican II, and we know the tragic consequences of that failure to implement the calls for reform issued by the Fifth Lateran Council: By the end of the decade, the Protastant Reformation has been born.

So, let us be generous in our estimation of Pope Paul VI given the enormity of the tasks he faced. Unlike McBrien, I think Paul will go down in history as the outstanding Pope of the 20th century precisely because he was able to begin the implementation of the reforms while keeping everyone, or almost everyone, on board.

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[1] http://ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/popes-20th-century-paul-vi