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Remembering Roncalli

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 24, 2014 Distinctly Catholic
Papal canonizations

Next Sunday, Pope Francis will canonize two of his predecessors, Bl. Pope John XXIII and Bl. Pope John Paul II. Like my colleague Fr. Tom Reese, S.J., I am not much of a fan of papal canonizations, although I am at least ambivalent. In the ?contra? column, the qualities that make for saintliness are not always the ones needed in a pope. In the ?affirmative? column, I do not doubt that both men were saintly in many ways and I like the idea of the Church proclaiming that men whose faults were well known are nonetheless capable of sainthood. There is hope for us all. Today, I wish to reflect a bit on John XXIII and, specifically, three episodes in his life that shaped his papacy in important ways.

On February 23, 1906, the bishops of the Province of Milan were meeting to plan a forthcoming Provincial Council. A young Angelo Roncalli was the secretary to the Bishop of Bergamo, Radini Tedeschi, at the time and while the bishops were meeting, the priest secretaries had time to wander about the archbishop?s palace in Milan. Roncalli was a church historian and he went into the library. He writes of the moment:

Suddenly I was struck by thirty-none parchment bound volumes which bore the title: Archivio Spirituale ? Bergamo. *I explored them. I read them through on successive visits. What a pleasant surprise to my spirit! To come across such rich and fascinating documents concerning the Church of Bergamo at the most characteristic period of its religious renewal, just after the Council of Trent, in the most ardent period of the Counter-reformation*.

The discovery put Roncalli on the path of a lifelong scholarly work, the editing of the records of St. Charles Borromeo?s apostolic visits throughout the region to implement the decrees of the Council of Trent. This work provided Roncalli a model of how a Council can reform the life of the Church in important ways and, as well, the importance of outstanding pastors in implementing conciliar decrees. You might say that this work turned Borromeo into a pioneer of the Second Vatican Council. The final, and fifth, volume of the works was published in 1957, the year before Roncalli was elected pope.

The second episode is related to the first. The Archbishop of Milan at the time of the discovery of Borromeo?s *acta* was Cardinal Andrea Carlo Ferrari. And, by 1906, Ferrari was known to be out of favor with the papal court of Pope Pius X and his Secretary of State, Cardinal Merry del Val. Pius X was also raised to the dignity of the altar, the only other 20th century pope to be so honored. But, his papacy was a disaster for the intellectual life of the Church, and not just its intellectual life. Men of the Church, loyal men like Ferrari and Radini Tedeschi, were considered dangerous. Any hint that one was familiar with modern ideas was enough to earn you an ?apostolic visitation,? which Ferrari aptly termed an ?apostolic vexation.? A network of spies swirled around the Vatican of Pius X, the *Sodalitium Pianum*, delating to the authorities anyone suspected of ?modernism.? The twin papal texts of 1907, Lamentabili and Pascendi dominici gregis, condemned modernism and a host of propositions associated with it. Newspapers known to be favorable to the pope cast aspersions on men like Ferrari and, indeed, a file was opened on Roncalli. He stood accused of teaching a suspect text in the seminary in Bergamo.

Cardinal Ferrari stood up to the campaign, issuing a pastoral letter in 1908 that attacked the anti-Modernist campaign: ?In certain reviews and newspapers warding off Modernism involves excesses. These anti-Modernist zealots discover Modernism all over the place, and even manage to throw suspicion on those who are very far removed from it.? So, the mentors and early champions of the future Pope John XXIII were men who had lived under a cloud of suspicion at the hands of the zelanti. When he become pope in 1958, after asking to see his own personnel file, John XXIII made clear to the world that the persecutorial style was not his own.

Another prelate, Giacomo della Chiesa, fell afoul of the anti-Modernists and was exiled from Rome to Bologna, yet three times passed over for a red hat. Della Chiesa was finally made a cardinal in May 1914. In August of that same year, Pius X died and della Chiesa was elected Pope Benedict XV. The story goes that when Cardinal Merry del Val approached the newly elected pope, his long-time enemy, to make his vow of obedience, Benedict leaned forward and said, ?The stone which the builders has rejected has become the cornerstone.? Merry del Val replied, ?It is marvelous to our eyes,? the word ?marvelous? perhaps better rendered as ?incredible? in modern usage. I suspect some cardinals in the curia today feel similarly regarding the man chosen to sit in the Chair of Peter last year.

The final episode in Roncalli?s life came in 1944. Having served as apostolic delegate to Bulgaria, then Turkey and Greece, Roncalli was catapulted into the most prominent nunciature in the world, 10 Avenue President Wilson, in Paris. Roncalli had not been the first choice of the pro-Secretary of State, Mgr Tardini, and Roncalli knew it. Roncalli wrote to a friend, ?Ubi deficiunt equi, trottant aselli? ? Where there are not horses available, the donkeys trot along. This self-effacing humor would be on display when he was elected pope and held the first ever press conference. Reporters did not know how to behave and the questions were mostly softballs. One asked: ?How many people work at the Vatican?? Pope John replied, ?About half.?

Back to the plot. At a time in the life of the Church in the United States when some see nothing but gloom and doom and indulge a histrionic portrayal of the forces arrayed against the Church, it is good to contemplate what Roncalli faced upon arriving in France. In 1944, most of France had been liberated and the DeGaullists came to power. The Ministry of the Interior, six months before Roncalli?s arrival as nuncio, had drawn up a list of Catholic bishops who they charged with collaboration with the Vichy government of Marshal Petain and/or with the Nazi-occupiers of the rest of the country. There were 25 names on the list, including those of three cardinals. (Cardinal Gerlier of Lyons had unfortunately said in the wake of the 1940 downfall of France, ?Today, France is Petain, and Petain is France.? When Roncalli arrived in Lyons to preach at the commemoration of the Council of Lyons, the mayor of the city met him and said, ?Today, Lyons is Gerlier, and Gerlier is Lyons.? Ouch.) The new government also insisted on the removal of the previous nuncio. Now, that is what an attack on religious freedom looks like.

The bulk of the negotiations were handled in Rome, between Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini, the future Pope Paul VI, and the newly appointed French ambassador to the Holy See, Jacques Maritain. But, Roncalli?s amiable presence in Paris helped calm the waters enormously and, in the end, seven bishops in France and French West Africa were quietly removed from office, given pensions, and new men sent to fill their place. In this episode we see a hallmark of the future pope?s belief that carrots work better than sticks, that principles must sometimes yield, or at least bend, to further the work of the Church. We see, too, in one note, his awareness that the ?*odium plebes*? ?hatred of the people ? was grounds for removing a bishop. I deprecate the intrusion of any democratic methods into the selection, or removal, of bishops but I believe too that a bishop who has lost the respect of his flock should be removed. Those who insist that such removals are an insult to the dignity of the episcopate get it backwards.

Angelo Roncalli had other experiences in his pre-papal life that gave some indication of how and why he would turn his short pontificate into such a seminal moment in the life of the Church. His time in the East disposed him to the necessity of inter-religious dialogue. Like all people his age, his hatred of war was thorough-going. Being raised among peasantry, with all the accumulated wisdom they bring, served him very well when confronted with stuffed cassocks at the Vatican.

Does any of this mean he was a saint? That is for others to decide. But, we see in Roncalli, an ability to reflect upon his experiences, and upon the history of the Church, in ways that shed light on the challenges the Church faces. He did not reduce everything to a natural law syllogism. He did not believe that hyper-orthodoxy was a greater sign of fidelity to the Church than a kind heart and a pastor?s touch. Like most historians, he tended to avoid excitability. He may have seen himself, already in 1944, as a trotting donkey, but this particular donkey, shaped by such a turbulent time, convoked the Council which is still the guiding star in the life of the Church of our time, and gave that Council its pastoral character and mission. It is not hard to see some of him in Pope Francis. It is not hard to hope that a similar sense of historically grounded, chastened by time and experience, yet still persistent, hope and charity will win out in the face of curial opposition, zealotry and small-mindedness today as it did when Angelo Roncalli assumed the Chair of Peter.

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