

Montini

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 28, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

Throughout the run-up to the canonizations, and indeed at the ceremony itself yesterday, the two men to be canonized were referred to as St. Pope John XXIII and St. Pope John Paul II. Indeed, on the altar where the remains of John Paul II are kept, the stone reads *Sanctus Johannes Paulus PP. II.* I would have preferred that we referred to St. Angelo Roncalli and St. Karol Wojtyla because the Church canonizes the person, not the pontificate. If we were to canonize pontificates, then the most obvious thing about the weekend's proceedings was the absence of a different name: Paul VI. Indeed, all this past week, as I wrote about John XXIII and John Paul II, as I watched the coverage of the ceremonies, as I walked the dogs and made my dinner, one name kept coming into my mind: Montini.

Montini was the great pope of my lifetime. It is true that there would have been no Second Vatican Council without John XXIII, but that Council would not have been a success without Paul VI. The first session of the Council was chaotic, no one had a plan, the preparatory commissions submitted dozens of proposed texts, but it was all scatter-shot, there was no over-arching theme or approach. Then-Cardinal Montini, in collaboration with Cardinals Suenens, Dopfner and others, helped to furnish that overall approach, dividing the topics into ad intra and ad extra concerns, focusing the Council's attention on the need to reflect on the mystery of the Church and, then, to examine the Church's relationship with the world. Still, the resistance from the curia was intense. They preferred a confused Council or a failed one. They wanted everyone to just go home. Pope John XXIII was dying. They considered the Council a nightmare and wanted all to consider it a dream, something that would vanish with the morn and, for them, the morn meant a new pope intent on shutting the thing down as quickly as possible.

The election of Montini in 1963 was not a foregone conclusion, although always likely. Montini had long been interested in the ideas of the French theologians who had been silenced under Pius XII but now furnished the theology that was shaping the Council's revision of the proposed texts. The other candidate of the progressives, Cardinal Lercaro of Bologna, had the zeal of a convert to the cause and he attracted votes. But, over time, the cardinals realized that they needed someone not to go to war with the curia, but to win them over. Montini, who had unparalleled experience within the curia, was the man for the job.

In the succeeding three sessions of the Council, Paul VI often took decisions that irritated the progressive caucus that had elected him. He sometimes over-ruled decisions made by the various commissions advising the Council when those decisions alienated powerful curial cardinals. Paul VI knew that there could be no "losers" or else the obstruction after the Council might prove insurmountable. And, so, when the famous *Nota Praevia* to *Lumen Gentium* was presented to the Council Fathers as a non-negotiable addition to the text, there were grumblings. But, the grumblings were misplaced. It was clear the majority of the Council fathers were prepared to chart a new course in many areas, but when they had departed to their sees, Paul VI would have to contend with a curia, and needed them to help him implement the Council's reforms. He kept the curialists on board.

The most important function of the pope is to build up and guarantee the unity of the Church. Paul VI did this. He kept everyone on board, which is why the eventual documents of the Council were all passed by such

lopsided majorities. All the while, he used his office to dramatize and focus the attention of the Church. While the Second Vatican Council was still sitting, he made his historic trip to Jerusalem, reminding the Church that Christ is her head and center, that all their deliberations had to be rooted in Him. There really was no better way to ratify the *ressourcement* theology than to return to Jerusalem. Paul VI also traveled to the United Nations in New York during the Council, again confirming by deed the intuition at the heart of the *aggiornamento*, the need for the Church to get out of the sacristy and into the world. If the trip to Jerusalem fleshed out the primary focus of *Lumen Gentium*, the trip to New York did the same for *Gaudium et Spes*. This is what the Council wanted more than anything: A Church rooted in Christ, in the events that happened in Jerusalem, reaching out to the whole world.

It is remarkable to think back to Paul VI's trip to the UN. It was a one day affair. His motorcade took him to St. Patrick's Cathedral for a prayer service, then he went to the Waldorf Astoria to meet President Johnson, then he went to the UN and gave his address, then to an inter-faith prayer service at a nearby church, then to Yankee Stadium for a Mass, then to the Vatican's pavilion at the World's Fair in Queens, then back to the airport. All in one day. Upon his return to Rome, he went straight from the airport to the aula, and gave the assembled Council fathers a report on his trip. That was one hell of a long day. But, when you look back at the images of that visit, you realize that it was so unprecedented, so breathtaking, even though for us, such papal trips now seem normal. And who can forget his still unheard plea at the UN: "*jamais plus la guerre, jamais plus la guerre.*"

In the post-conciliar period, patiently and persistently, Paul VI set about the implementation of the Council. Many saw him as a Hamlet-like figure, and many subsequently compared him unfavorably with the more heroic figure of John Paul II. But, the period after a Council is not given to the drawing of lines in the shifting sands. It takes a while for the sand and the dust to settle. The Church did not need a "hero" in 1965. It needed someone who sensed and, in a way, internalized the many conflicting, centrifugal urges the Council had unleashed. It needed a Hamlet and got a very smart, very savvy, Hamlet. And, for all the turmoil of the post-conciliar period, ask anyone in Rome and they will tell you that the last time the curia functioned well, it was under Montini.

Three of his encyclicals warrant mention. *Populorum progressio* reads a bit quaintly today. Paul shared the confidence of many in the 1960s that international development aid could alleviate poverty in the world, a confidence that has been frustrated and disappointed for a variety of reasons. But, Paul VI discerned in ways some bishops still decline to admit, that the "erroneous autonomy" Leo XIII had warned against and Pope Pius XI had called a "poisoned spring," this hyper-individualism in the West was destroying not just this belief or that, but the disposition to believe and threatening humanity itself. This is not the place to launch into a long examination of *Humanae vitae*. I am aware that many readers do not share my sympathy with the teaching of that encyclical. Let me say only this: You may not think Paul VI got it right, but I think any honest reading of that encyclical must also admit that he did not get it wrong, and that the text reads better with each and every passing year. Finally, in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, an encyclical in all but name, Paul VI articulated the need for what we have come to call the New Evangelization, reminding the Church that a missionary spirit is not optional to the Christian vocation and that the surest way to strengthen our sense of Catholic identity is to share it with others.

So, as the Church welcomes to new pope-saints, I wish to remind readers of the great pope who reigned between them. I have no idea if Montini the man was a saint or not. But, Paul VI was the great pope of the twentieth century and I am convinced that history will be kinder to him than my generations has been.

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