Opinion
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St. Pope Paul VI is seen in this portrait made in early 1969. (OSV News)



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On this date, Aug. 6, 1978, St. Pope Paul VI died. Media coverage was uncharitable in its estimation of his tenure, but as time passes it has become clear that he was the great pope of the 20th century.

Paul VI's pontificate was shaped entirely by the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council. In the 1963 conclave that elected him, he was the candidate of those cardinals who wanted to continue the council and its agenda of reform and renewal. As pope, he was tasked with overseeing the last three sessions of the council, bringing it to a successful close. And the rest of his pontificate was dedicated to beginning the implementation of the vision the council had given to the church. These were massive achievements.

At Vatican II, he achieved near unanimous consensus. The most contentious document at Vatican II was the decree on religious liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*. It went through many drafts, each one aiming to achieve greater consensus on the meaning of the word *freedom* in the context of religion. Large theological issues were at stake. Some bishops were dead set against any doctrinal change whatsoever. Yet, the final text was approved by a vote of 2,308 in favor and 70 against. This was no mere majority. This was an overwhelming (97%) consensus. Paul's interventions — and his patience in letting the process work itself out — made that consensus possible and, finally, inevitable.

The other documents of Vatican II were adopted by even larger vote totals. At times, Paul had intervened to satisfy conservative prelates, and other times he sided with those pushing for reform. Everyone was mad at him at some point, which is always the mark of a great leader.



Pope Paul VI presides over a meeting of the Second Vatican Council in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in 1963. (CNS/Catholic Press Photo)

His first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, was issued (ironically) on Aug. 6, 1964. He had written it himself, according to biographer Peter Hebblethwaite. The text was programmatic and the themes sound familiar to us today: Awareness, renewal, dialogue. Paul's 1975 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, helped refocus the church on its primary mission of evangelization, a focus that has continued through all five subsequent pontificates.

Implementing the council was no small thing. Paul had to launch the synod of bishops, and no one knew how to really start such a thing. Through fits and starts, it became a part of the normal routine of the universal church. He had to appoint bishops in tune with the conciliar vision of a church that engages the world, rather than one that removes itself from the world. Paul had to conduct the ecumenical and interreligious dialogues for which the council had called, again, without any recent precedents.

Vatican II had unleashed pent-up centrifugal forces in the church. After a century of dominant ultramontanism, in which all issues and problems were referred to Rome, the council called for a more collegial church, one in which bishops served as leaders of the local churches, not just as branch managers of Vatican Inc. Paul's tenure was marked by the need to focus and tame these centrifugal forces, occasionally tapping the brakes and reasserting centripetal counterforces. The church needs both instincts. His successors, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, tried to rein in the centrifugal forces, and Pope Francis gave them new life. In the first few years after the council, it was critical to have a pope who did both.

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Of course, Paul's most famous encyclical was *Humanae Vitae*, issued in 1968. The encyclical proscribed artificial methods of birth control, and the headlines read "Pope Bans Pill." Rereading it all these years later, a key insight emerges that transcends the limited issue of birth control.

In the very first section of the encyclical, Paul, writing about modern developments, notes, "The most remarkable development of all is to be seen in man's stupendous progress in the domination and rational organization of the forces of nature to the point that he is endeavoring to extend this control over every aspect of his own life — over his body, over his mind and emotions, over his social life, and even over the laws that regulate the transmission of life."

Whatever one thinks of the prohibition against artificial birth control, Paul's warning that our "domination and rational organization" risk losing sight of the fact that human life is a gift rings more and more true as we confront cloning and artificial intelligence and a host of other developments that promise progress but invite dread. If we do not recover our sense of the giftedness of human life, it is hard to imagine how the human race survives.



Pope Paul VI offers a blessing at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Airport before boarding a flight to Istanbul in 1967. (CNS file)

After decades of the pope being a "prisoner in the Vatican" until the signing of the Lateran Pact in 1929, and Paul's predecessors never leaving Italy, Paul became the first pope to embark on international travels. Paul went to the Holy Land and to the United Nations, to Latin America and India, and to the Philippines. The dawn of the jet age, and Paul's example, has made international travel part of every subsequent pope's agenda. The universal pastor can now be seen in person throughout the world.

The last years of Paul's life were beset by a sense of drift and violence in the culture. Italy and many other European countries experienced homegrown terrorism. The loss of his dear friend Aldo Moro, an Italian statesman, at the hands of the Red Brigades not only haunted Paul, but demonstrated these new revolutionaries' indifference to the church and to the pope. It also demonstrated his powerlessness before these forces of evil.

Powerlessness, however, is a gift from God, one that is uniquely valuable to those preparing to cross the abyss. I am not a fan of canonizing popes, especially not so soon after their death. I do not doubt that Pope Paul VI is in heaven, but the skill set to be a great pope does not entirely overlap with our normal understanding of saintliness. Paul was a great pope.