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Popes of the 20th Century: John XXIII

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

I began writing this weekly column in early July, 1966. It was long before all of my undergraduate students and all but a handful of my graduate students were born.

In that first year, the week of November 4th to be exact, I did a column on the theology of revelation and how Pope John XXIII, who had died three-and-a-half years earlier, had embodied that theology in his own life and ministry.

The column described the late pope as "one of the most dramatic and most effective revelation-events of our time."

What is a revelation-event and how do individual persons become an expression of it?

A revelation-event is any happening by which God becomes a tangible reality in the lives of ordinary people.

St. Paul gave us the basic formula: "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). In other words, Christ must find concrete expression in others if he is to be understood and embraced.

But even a great saint like Paul is far removed from us. Pope John XXIII is more meaningful than St. Paul for those who lived through the Second Vatican Council and the years following it.

"Imitate John, and you shall imitate Christ," I wrote. "Imitate his spirit of warmth and love, his openness to all peoples, of every race, nation, religious belief and non-belief. Imitate his concern for the humble and the neglected, for the "cast-offs" of our society. Imitate his spirit of resignation to God's will in the face of suffering and certain death."

?Why is it,? I asked, ?that the life and ministry of Pope John XXIII struck such a responsive chord in the hearts of all mankind, believer and non-believer alike? ...Why is it that people...were touched by the example of the Good Shepherd visiting the sick, the orphans, and those in prison? Why is it that people...found inspiration and hope in the sickness and suffering and dying of John XXIII??

?The contemporary theology of revelation,? the column concluded, ?is eminently pastoral and practical. [We] must be ever more sensitive to the presence of God in the people and in the reality around [us].?

Pope John XXIII was such a person.

Nowhere was the Second Vatican Council?s purpose articulated more clearly or more forcefully than in the opening address of the pope who convened it.

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This council, Pope John XXIII insisted, was not being held to condemn errors in the Church or in the world at large, as Pope Pius IX had done in his *Syllabus of Errors* in 1864, or as Pope Pius X had done in his anti-Modernist decree of 1907, or as Pope Pius XII had done in his encyclical *Humani generis* in 1950.

?The post-French Revolution Pisan Church had reached the end of its line,? my column for the week of November 5, 1982, pointed out.

?The Church was now summoned by a new, positive, hoped-filled voice of leadership to correlate the Church?s ?sacred patrimony of truth?, as Pope John XXIII called it, with ?the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate?..?

?The substance of the ancient doctrine...is one thing,? the pope declared, ?and the way in which it is presented is another.?

This was not the time for negativism and condemnations, he warned, even as he was surrounded by ?prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand....?

?That grand Johannine vision still lives in the Church,? I wrote in that column more than 28 years ago. It lives on ?in the hearts and minds of [many] of its active members....?

I reminded readers in my column for the week of August 21, 2000, that John XXIII is ?widely regarded as the most beloved pope in history.? Indeed, many of the bishops at Vatican II had petitioned Pope Paul VI to proclaim John a saint then and there.

But because Paul VI was concerned about the feelings of the council?s defeated minority, he declined to do so. Instead, he announced that John XXIII?s cause for canonization would be linked with that of Paul VI?s own mentor, Pope Pius XII?an idea, as we now know, that was doomed from the start.

When John XXIII died on the evening of June 3, 1963, virtually the whole world mourned. Even the Union Jack was lowered to half-mast in the bitterly divided city of Belfast.

In the early Church John XXIII would have been proclaimed a saint by popular demand.

The pity is that many younger Catholics today never knew him.

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