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What About Montini?

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Distinctly Catholic

This past week, understandably, the entire Catholic world has been focused on Pope Blessed John Paul II and his beatification. In the days leading up to it, E.J. Dionne called for speeding up the process of canonizing Pope Blessed John XXIII. The effort to beatify Pope Pius XII is stalled, given controversies surrounding his tenure, specifically how he responded to the Nazi threat.

Lost in all of this has been any attention to someone whom I think will go down in history as one of the truly great pontiffs, Pope Paul VI.

Paul, of course, lacked the personal charm of his predecessor John XXIII and his once removed successor Pope John Paul II. Still, he shares credit with John for shaping the Second Vatican Council and credit with John Paul II for implementing it. Indeed, there is scarcely a more difficult job in the world than being Pope in the years immediately following a Council in which the reception of the conciliar texts must begin.

Texts, especially texts drawn up by committees, tend to be complex documents with lots of ambiguities to be resolved. I may focus on one part of a given document and someone with a different ideological perspective may rightly claim justification from a different part of the same text. There is always the threat of a schism. And, all this complicated task of beginning the implementation of Vatican II happened against the backdrop of the 1960s and all the social and cultural and political turmoil that decade contained.

I do not know if Giovanni Battista Montini was a saint or not. He certainly had a Hamlet-like view of himself that, in some eyes, compared unfavorably with his forceful successor. Perhaps his ambivalence was rooted in a deep appreciation for human nature. Perhaps it was rooted in something else. Such genuine humility is, in my experience, the fruit of deep wisdom.

Anyone can make a splash: Just jump into the water. But, to weigh alternatives carefully, to balance interests, to look ahead, but not too far, to conciliate those with whom one disagrees, all these characteristics of Montini's pontificate made him very effective in a very difficult time and place.

I am all for canonizing John XXIII and I will have no objection should John Paul II also be canonized. But, let us not forget Pope Paul VI whose pontificate was wracked by controversies but who nonetheless kept the barque of Peter afloat and kept almost everyone on board.

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