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John XXIII & Francis

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Over at Whispers, Rocco has an account of yesterday's audience with Pope Francis and a group of pilgrims from Bergamo, hometown of Pope John XXIII on the 50th anniversary of his death.

The Bishop of Bergamo noted a resemblance between the two pontiffs: "to so many of us a resemblance is immediately apparent," citing especially "gestures, language, attachment; of Gospel freedom and of a heart open to all ? that recalls for us the holy Pope who came from Bergamo." I think the phrase "Gospel freedom" is worthy of special attention, not least because, as Pope Francis called attention in his remarks, Pope John XXIII's episcopal motto was "Oboedientia et Pax," and Gospel freedom seems to emerge from both the practice of obedience and the deep yearning for peace, not as abstract concepts, but as a way to live one's life. There is a freedom uniquely available to those who have surrendered themselves to the Gospel. I think you can see it, also, in the lives of the four pontiffs who reigned between John and Francis.

Still, for all their differences - John XXIII for instance loved elaborate rituals - there is something in the mien of these two men that really is similar, a knack for the common person, a willingness to speak from their own experiences, a straight-forwardness in speech, a firmly grounded but unelaborate theological style, and the ability to communicate intense love to people in their midst and across the airwaves. I am not old enough to remember "good Pope John" but I am beginning to discern in people's responses to Francis why John has such a hold on the hearts of those who do remember him. Francis acts like a father, a gentle, loving, encouraging father. There is nothing of the scold in him as there was not in Pope John. And, both men have shown a willingness to challenge the scolds and prophets of gloom in their midst.

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