



Fourth Sunday of Lent March 30, 2014 A

Church History—Part 20 The Papacies of John Paul I, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis

This is the second installment of Church History—Part 20, continued from last week's column.

Pope John Paul I (1978) - The Smiling Pope

Although pope for only 33 days, John Paul I's papacy is not the shortest in papal history. There were ten other popes who served 32 days or less. Whereas only 51 cardinals elected John XXIII, 111 cardinals enter the Conclave to elect Albino Luciani, the son of working class parents. The new pope chooses a double name, John Paul (the first pope to do so in history). He takes the name John (after Pope John XXIII who ordained him bishop) and a second name Paul (after Pope Paul VI who named him cardinal). His name choice also signifies his intention to continue the work of both popes with Vatican Council II. The new pope breaks a tradition of more than a thousand years when he refuses to be crowned with a triple tiara. Instead, he is invested with a pallium (woolen vestment worn around the neck of an archbishop as a symbol of pastoral authority).

John Paul I's warmth and gentleness quickly captivate the whole world. The media fall in love with him (just as they do now with our new Pope Francis). Sadly, after a mere 33 days in office, John Paul I dies suddenly of a heart attack. At the pope's funeral Mass, Cardinal Confalonieri remarks that John Paul "flashed like a meteor across the sky." We can only imagine what the papacy of this smiling and much loved pope might have been if he had lived longer.

Pope John Paul II (1978-2005)

Cardinal Karol Wojtyla is the first Slavic pope in history and the first non-Italian pope since Adrian VI (1522-1523). He is also the first pope from a communist-dominated nation. His 27-year pontificate is the third longest in history, and its impact is so profound that many have dubbed him "John Paul the Great," a title that only time can test.

Eight hallmarks of John Paul's papacy are:

Missionary Pope. John Paul makes over 80 pastoral visits to about 150 different countries, seven of them to his native Poland. He knows how to work the crowds better than any modern-day politician.

World Youth Day. In and through the creation of World Youth Day, John Paul takes the opportunity to speak to millions of young people from all over the world. Many young people will testify that their call to the priesthood and religious life is the result of their participation in World Youth Day.

His role in the fall of the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. Many informed observers attribute the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, at least in part, to John Paul's influence and diplomacy. This is most evident in his support of the Solidarity Movement in Poland. In 1980, his visit to the Philippines leads to the revolt against the dictatorship of then President Ferdinand Marcos. His highly publicized visit to Cuba in 1988 results in the release of 300 political prisoners.

Teacher. John Paul writes four Encyclicals and many apostolic exhortations and letters on a wide variety of subjects, such as social justice, life issues, family, ecumenism, Mary, and the Rosary. In 1992, he authorizes the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. He revises the Code of Canon Law.

Mercy and forgiveness. In his Encyclical *On the Mercy of God*, John Paul speaks very beautifully of God's mercy. He makes the cover of *Time* magazine after visiting a prison to forgive Mehmet Ali Agca who tried to assassinate him. In March of the Jubilee Year 2000, he again makes world headlines when, in front of thousands of pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's Square, he asks for forgiveness for the Church for her sins against various groups throughout the Church's history, among them: the Crusades' attack on Constantinople, the Inquisition, trial of Galileo, and violation of women's rights and other minorities. Perhaps John Paul's most notable apology takes place in Jerusalem in 2000 when he tells the Jewish people of the Church's sadness at

how Christians through the ages persecuted and mistreated them, and that the seeds of the Holocaust were fostered in Germany, a Christian country.

Ecumenism. Like his predecessors, John Paul is very interested in promoting ecumenism. Twice he invites the leaders of major world religions to Assisi for a World Day for Peace. In 1997, the “Joint Declaration on Justification” (the issue that brought about the Protestant Reformation) is approved by the World Lutheran Federation and Rome.

Saints. John Paul beatifies and canonizes a good many men and women—1,316 Blessed and about 470 Saints, i.e., more than the combined total declared by his predecessors. In beatifying and canonizing men and women from many cultures and background, he is stating that sanctity and heroic virtue are found in every setting and are possible for all people.

Ushering in the third millennium. John Paul is convinced throughout his whole pontificate that he is destined by God to lead the Catholic Church into the third millennium. But, in a dramatic ceremony, the feeble pope will push open the Holy Door of St. Peter’s on Christmas Eve 1999.

John Paul humanizes the papacy and brings the Catholic faith to a worldwide stage. His many travels, his love of youth, his outreach to people of other faiths, his advocacy for the poor—all of these endear him to people of all faiths around the globe. However, he is not without critics, even within the Church. Some see him as too authoritarian and unbending. His staunch defense of *Humanae Vitae*, ban on women’s ordination, silencing of dissident theologians, and cutback in the authority of national bishops’ conferences, are viewed by his critics as polarizing. Perhaps his biggest failure is not dealing much more forcefully with the sex abuse scandal that has rocked the church at the third of this millennium.

The last year of John Paul’s papacy is marred by his many health issues, especially Parkinson’s disease, which has gradually made it difficult for him to speak and smile. He serenely accepts his suffering as God’s will and witnesses to the world the dignity of an elderly person in declining health.

Benedict XVI (2005-2013)

As a young theologian at Vatican II, Fr. Ratzinger is considered a progressive theologian. Some years after the Council, he becomes disenchanted with progressives

and joins the more conservative thinkers. In 1977, Pope Paul VI appoints him Archbishop of Munich and also makes him cardinal. In 1981, Pope John Paul II appoints him *Prefect for the Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith*, the Vatican’s top man charged to protect the orthodoxy of Catholic teaching. The Cardinal in this position sometimes has to deal with theologians whose writings have, in the Vatican’s opinion, crossed the line of orthodoxy. During this time in the Congregation of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger is often seen as a rigid doctrinal watchdog and enforcer of the faith, earning him the nickname “God’s Rottweiler.” Many believe that such portrayal of him is unfair.

It is said that he had asked Pope John Paul twice to allow him to retire so that he could return to Bavaria and write. But obviously God has other plans for him. In April 2005, at the age of 78, Cardinal Ratzinger is elected Pope after a short Conclave.

It is not easy for the mild-mannered new Pope to follow his charismatic predecessor. A central theme of his papacy is the defense of Christian values in a Europe that he sees in moral decline. Conservatives who expect him to appoint hardline traditionalists to key posts are very disappointed.

This professor Pope continues to find time to write during his years as Pope. His two volumes on *Jesus of Nazareth* are very well received by Catholic and non-Catholic readers.

Many give him credit for doing a much better job than Pope John Paul II in dealing with the sex abuse crisis that is causing so much harm to the Church. On several occasions, he meets with victims and apologizes for the hurt inflicted on them by clerics. He introduces fast-track rules for removing abusive priests from the priesthood.

Speaking of Benedict, Cardinal O’Connor, Archbishop Emeritus of London, says that he is “unfailingly courteous” and has many talents, but administration is not one of them. An embarrassing leak of documents from Benedict’s desk reveals corruption and mismanagement inside the Vatican. Shortly after, in February 2013, the 85-year old Benedict shocks the world when he announces that, after much prayer and reflection, he has decided to resign from the papacy as he no longer has the strength to fulfill his role. He becomes the first Pope in 600 years to resign. Many applaud Benedict for his humility and courage in taking such a step.

Pope Francis (2013 -) — Changing the music

On March 13, 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio is elected Pope, the first from the Americas. From the moment of his election, when he bows his head on St. Peter's balcony asking the people to pray for him, and a few days later washing the feet of a woman and a Muslim in prison, Francis has taken the world by storm. In December 2013, *Time* magazine selects Francis as its Person of the Year. In the cover story, Nancy Gibbs says: "*In less than a year, Francis has done something remarkable: he has not changed the words, but he's changed the music.*" With a focus on compassion, the new leader of the Catholic Church has, according to Gibbs, become a new voice of conscience.

A major reason for Francis' extraordinary influence, not just on the Church but also on the wider culture, is his humanity. He smiles. He connects with people. His style is pastoral. He speaks and writes simply and clearly. Above all, people see him as embodying the message he preaches. In other words, he lives what he says; he practices what he preaches.

He does not just mention the word 'mercy' repeatedly; he shows it by embracing people with deformities, by kissing the feet of prisoners, by his description of the Church as a field hospital...a big tent...a place of refuge and compassion. In so many ways, he has, as Nancy Gibbs says, changed the music.

Pope Francis invites all of us in the Church, regardless of rank, role or status, to change the music too. Writing in *Redemptorist* magazine, *Reality* (January 2014), Fr. Gerard Moloney, C.S.S.R., names four ways by which Francis is calling us to change the music.

First, by becoming joy-filled people. Francis' first apostolic exhortation is called *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel). As Christians, he says, we must radiate joy because we are filled with the hope born of the joy of the Gospel. Because of this hope, we can never allow ourselves to become "disillusioned pessimists" or 'sourpusses.'" What do people see when they see us, in the pew or in the pulpit, on the street or in the sacristy: joy-filled people or disillusioned sourpusses?

Second, by becoming welcoming people. Francis' message is one of inclusion, not exclusion; of compassion, not condemnation; of tender embrace, not finger-wagging; of listening, not scolding. His words and actions speak of welcome and mercy. Can we say the same of our homes and parishes and churches?

Third, by becoming pro-life people. To be pro-life is more than being anti-abortion. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis links abortion to other attacks on human dignity. He links it to everything that is destructive of life: poverty, inequality, injustice, oppression. This is a well-established Church teaching which Francis' predecessors have equally emphasized. But it often gets overlooked or carefully ignored. What he is saying is: We cannot claim to be pro-life and, at the same time, discriminate against those who work for us; we cannot be pro-life and be racists; we cannot be pro-life and favor the death penalty or tax loopholes for the rich. As followers of Jesus, are we pro-life from womb to tomb?

Fourth, by becoming humble people. What endears Francis to so many is his simplicity. He is not interested in the "high life" or the trappings of office, because he wants to show that the Christian is a follower of a humble carpenter from Nazareth who had nowhere to lay his head. That is why he wants "a poor church for the poor." His message has particular resonance for bishops, priests, and religious, but it applies to everyone in the Church. Fancy residences, ostentatious lifestyles, lordly titles, expensive cars, fine wardrobes, rich vestments, big egos, a liking for lace—all run counter to this Franciscan attitude. What is our relationship with money, power, and status?

All this is key to evangelization. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis reminds us that we are all missionaries, and how we live speaks volumes. It will build up the Church or damage it; it will point towards Jesus or away from him. Francis has captured the popular imagination in an extraordinary way and he is using this opportunity to point towards Jesus, to spread the Gospel. We will be effective evangelizers by following his way.

Conclusion

Michael Pennock concludes his book on Church history with these words:

The Church is a part of human history, but she also transcends human history. The Church is made up of sinners, but she herself is sinless. The Church is both a human and divine institution.

None of the above statements about the Church are contradictory. It is only in our awareness of the mystery of the Church that we can at once examine in detail her visible history while at the same time living in awareness of her spiritual reality as a bearer of divine life.

This Pilgrim Church continues on her journey to perfection, which she will reach only in the glory of heaven. "At that time, together with the human race, the universe itself, which is so closely related to man and which attains its destiny through him, will be perfectly reestablished in Christ" (Lumen Gentium, #48).

This is the journey to which we participate as sojourners of this earth and baptized members of Christ's Church. We do so in hope and longing for the time when the Lord "will wipe every tear from [our] eyes and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away" (Rev 21:4). (This is Our Church – A History of Catholicism, p.301)

Further Reading

At the end of the first article, I gave a list of books that guided me through this 2,000-year journey of our Church's history. Of those books, two of them were especially helpful:

Koch, Carl. *A Popular History of the Catholic Church*. Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1997.

Pennock, Michael. *This is our Church: A History of Catholicism*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2008.

Have a grace-filled Lent,

Fr. Sean