

## THE GREATEST POPE OF THE XXTH CENTURY

“Then leading him to a height, the devil showed him in a moment of time all the kingdoms of the world and said to him, *I will give you all this power and the glory of these kingdoms, for it has been committed to me and I give it to anyone I choose...*”

Luke 4: 5, 6

How would you choose the greatest Pope of the last century? Holiness would certainly be a desideratum; administrative ability, too; courage; the ability to enunciate the Church’s teaching; the will, demonstrated by action, to enforce it; prudence in addressing the complex and convoluted evils presented by the world; resilience in the face of attack; and, of course, a sound grasp of the Church’s philosophy and theology. What about personal charism, or worldly popularity? Should these count?

Despite the fact that his reign expired within three years of the century’s opening, **Leo XIII** (Giacchino Pecci) must be a strong candidate. The wisdom of *Graves De Commune Re*, his encyclical on the shortcomings of the idea of Christian democracy (January 1901), demonstrates that the force of his intellect was undiminished in his ninety first year. Just two months prior he had published *Tametsi Futura Prospicientibus*, his encyclical on Christ the Redeemer, in which appears this clarion cry: “The greatest of all misfortunes is never to have known Jesus Christ...” And in *Annum Sacrum* (May, 1899) not only did he repeat Christ’s rejection of the devil’s claim embodied in the spirit of the modern world, but asserted the very contrary—

“[Christ’s] empire includes not only Catholic nations, not only baptised persons who, though of right belonging to the Church, have been led astray by error, or have been cut off from her by schism, but also all those who are outside the Christian faith; so that truly the whole of mankind is subject to the power of Jesus Christ.”

He was undoubtedly the greatest Pope of the nineteenth century; probably the greatest since Sixtus V in the sixteenth century.

**Pius X** (Giuseppe Sarto) was the first Pope in 350 years to be canonised. We can thank him for the Church’s insistence on frequent Communion, and for the admission of children to Communion once arrived at the age of reason. Famously, he refused to compromise the freedom of the Church in the face of threats from France’s Masonic government, ordering his clergy throughout the land to abandon the Church’s property. There were Catholics who criticised him:

“They speak too much of the goods of the Church and too little of her *good*,” said the Pope. “Tell them that history repeats itself. Ages ago on a high mountain two powers stood face to face. *All this will I give thee*, said the one, offering the kingdoms of the earth and their riches, *if thou wilt fall down and worship me*. The other refused—and is refusing still...”<sup>1</sup>

He tackled the Modernist gnosticism, the last great heresy, head on. He was devastated by the onset of the first World War which, arguably, killed him.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in F A Forbes, *Pope St Pius X*, London, 1918; my copy by TAN Books, 1987, p.73.

**Benedict XV** (Giacomo della Chiesa) bore the burden of World War I, constantly interceding with the governments of the combatants in an endeavour to negotiate peace and to reduce the suffering the war had precipitated. He promulgated the 1917 *Code of Canon Law*.

**Pius XI** (Achille Rati) instituted, with his encyclical *Quas Primas* (1925), the Feast of Christ the King building on the teaching of his predecessors. He was the Pope of the Missions. In *Casti Connubii* (1930) he addressed more comprehensively than Paul VI thirty seven years later, the evils of contraception and the various attacks upon marriage and the family, as he responded to the Anglican betrayal of principle at the Lambeth Conference the same year. He confronted the purveyors of tyranny in his encyclicals against National Socialism (*Mit Brennender Sorge*—March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1937) and atheistic Communism (*Divini Redemptoris*—March 19<sup>th</sup> 1937).

**Pius XII** (Eugenio Pacelli) had the demons of hell fall upon his head as these twin perversions joined to overwhelm all that was good in the Second World War. He resisted them with a fortitude and a prudence which match him with the greatest of his predecessors in adversity. When the two tyrannies severed allegiance, Pius found himself fighting on two fronts, damned by the proponents of each. He would have had little difficulty identifying Stalin's Communists as a greater evil than Hitler's Nazis, nor would he have been surprised to learn that the lie that he was "Hitler's Pope" was initiated by the Soviets.<sup>2</sup> He was the last Pope who was also a moral theologian, solving within days of their arising the sort of difficulties that leave the present heads of our Vatican Congregations prostrate with indecision. He did so, moreover, month by month, throughout the course of his long pontificate.

All of these Popes, but Leo and Pius XII in particular, were grounded in the Church's philosophy, St Thomas's metaphysics, and understood the ultimate reasons why the Church teaches as she does. They recognised the Church's enemy—Masonic, Marxist and Modernist—and repulsed his attacks.

With **John XXIII** (Guiseppe Roncalli), the Papacy lost sight of the enemy chiefly, it would seem, because he had infiltrated the Vatican in the most insidious of his disguises. The Popes thereafter altered course and the ground of the Church's teaching, adherence to the timeless truths enunciated for almost 2,000 years, was compromised in a desire for worldly popularity.

The signal event that marked this change of direction was, of course, the convocation of bishops in the Second Vatican Council. John XXIII thought his idea of a Council an inspiration of the Holy Spirit: his advisers were not so sure. We have argued elsewhere that Vatican II is unique among the Church's Ecumenical Councils in lacking an objective reason *in causa fidei* for its summoning and, in consequence, was never invested with the charism of *extraordinary* infallibility that characterised

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. "Pius XII: A Book and an Essay shed light on the Black Legend", at Chiesa news, <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1337848?eng=y> ; and *In Difesa di Pio XII. Le ragioni della storia*, Ed. Giovanni Maria Vian, Venice (Marsilio), 2009.

every one of its predecessors. The truth or falsity of that suggestion must abide the Church's formal determination. If true it will demonstrate that many departures from the Church's teachings sanctioned by the Second Vatican Council were not authorised by the Church at all, only by her bishops acting outside their authority.

**Paul VI** (Giovanni Battista Montini) was trained in the philosophy of St Thomas but it seems to have had little impact upon him. He was caught up in the movement to embrace the *zeitgeist* initiated by his predecessor. He did not wait for the Council Fathers to deny the Church's condemnation of religious freedom before denying it himself in an address to the United Nations General Assembly on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1965. He seemed oblivious of the fact that he was not only contradicting Church teaching, but submitting his great office and its dignity to a mere worldly institution. There could hardly be a clearer example of inversion of the principle invoked by Leo XIII in *Annum Sacrum*, by St Pius X in his rejection of the Masonic demands of the French Government, and by Pius XI in *Quas Primas*.

On the death of Paul VI, there occurred the short pontificate of Albino Luciani who took a name compounded of those of his two predecessors. When he died just over a month after his election, he was succeeded by **John Paul II** (Karol Wojtyla), the first Polish Pope.

Pope John Paul II is a remarkable figure, but not for the reasons most would give. Certainly, he had charisma and a courageous commitment to the Church, and the effects of his personality were far reaching and will endure. But matched with these gifts was a remarkable naivety in respect of the Church's philosophy and her theology. In the early months of his pontificate in Wednesday audiences he presented a personal exegesis of the Book of *Genesis* and the teachings of St Paul that sought to embrace the follies of Feminist ideology. It never seemed to occur to him that he was doing violence to the Church's theology. This naivety hardly diminished throughout the 26½ years of his pontificate.

In 1950, in *Humani Generis*, Pius XII had set out the evils flowing from the failure to adhere to the Church's directives in the formation and instruction of her students for the priesthood. Karol Wojtyla stands as a paradigm of what can go wrong in the thinking of a young priest grounded on the shifting sands of modern philosophy. The defective formation he received deprived an active and enquiring mind of its essential tools. One who might, on his elevation to the papacy, have rivalled Leo XIII was reduced to repeating the inanities of subjectivism. They rendered his early encyclicals almost unreadable.

Not quite twenty years after his elevation, Pope John Paul II issued an encyclical in which, no doubt quite unwittingly, he rejected the very ground of Pius XII's claims in *Humani Generis*. The circularity is Dickensian. Pius XII, consistently with his predecessors over seven centuries, had insisted that students for the priesthood should be formed in the Church's philosophy, the philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas. In *Fides et Ratio* John Paul II ignored this teaching. Not only did he deny that the Church had a philosophy of her own, but he denied that it was the philosophy of St

Thomas. Worse still, he then claimed, quite falsely, that Pius XII in *Humani Generis* supported the latter proposition!

Some may argue that his heroism in the face of adversity will see Pope John Paul II raised to the altars of the Church. Please God it may be so. But sanctity does not guarantee freedom from error. Were it otherwise, every saint would be a Doctor of the Church. But there are only thirty three Church Doctors.

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In his study of St John Vianney, *The Curé D'Ars Today*, noted American commentator, Fr George Rutler, cites in praise of his saintly hero no less an authority than the devil himself overheard to remark through the mouth of a woman the Curé was in the process of exorcising, "If there were three like you on earth, my kingdom would be destroyed..."<sup>3</sup> While Fr Rutler rightly wonders whether, even when he is heard to speak against himself, one could trust the devil to speak the truth, he concedes that Satan appears to have one virtue, that of taking Christ seriously.<sup>4</sup> Even in his malice, the devil serves God's ends.

If the greatest Pope of the twentieth century was the one who did the devil the greatest harm, we should look for the Pope whom the devil has chosen most to vilify in the modern world. One stands out from all the rest—Pope Pius XII.

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12<sup>th</sup> April 2009—*Easter Sunday*

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<sup>3</sup> San Francisco (St Ignatius Press), 1988, pp. 174-5.

<sup>4</sup> *The Curé D'Ars Today*, op. cit., p. 162.