

## The Price of Infallibility

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WITH the news media awash in encomiums to the indisputable greatness of Pope John Paul II, isn't it time to ask to which tradition he belonged? Partisans unfamiliar with Christian history may judge this a strange question. Why, they may answer, he belonged to the Catholic tradition, of course. But there is no single Catholic tradition; there are rather Catholic traditions, which range from the voluntary poverty of St. Francis of Assisi to the boundless greed of the Avignon popes, from the genial tolerance for diversity of Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century to the egomaniacal self-importance of Pope Pius IX in the 19th century, from the secrecy and plotting of Opus Dei to the openness and humane service of the Community of Sant'Egidio. Over its 2,000-year history, Roman Catholicism has provided a fertile field for an immense variety of papal traditions.

Despite his choice of name, John Paul II shared little with his immediate predecessors. John Paul I lasted slightly more than a month, but in that time we were treated to a typical Italian of moderating tendencies, one who had even, before his election, congratulated the parents of the world's first test-tube baby - not a gesture that resonated with the church's fundamentalists, who still insist on holding the line against anything that smacks of tampering with nature, an intellectual construct far removed from what ordinary people mean by that word.

Paul VI, though painfully cautious, allowed the appointment of bishops (and especially archbishops and cardinals) who were the opposite of yes men, outspoken champions of the poor and oppressed and truly representative of the parts of the world they came from, like Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, who tried so hard at the end of his life to find common ground within a church rent by division. In contrast, Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston rebuked the dying Cardinal Bernardin for this effort because, as Cardinal Law insisted, the church knows the truth and is therefore exempt from anything as undignified as dialogue. Cardinal Law, who had to resign after revelations that he had repeatedly allowed priests accused of sexual abuse to remain in the ministry while failing to inform either law enforcement officials or parishioners, must stand as the characteristic representative of John Paul II, protective of the church but often dismissive of the moral requirement to protect and cherish human beings.

John Paul II has been almost the polar opposite of John XXIII, who dragged Catholicism to confront 20th-century realities after the regressive policies of Pius IX, who imposed the peculiar doctrine of papal infallibility on the First Vatican Council in 1870, and after the reign of terror inflicted by Pius X on Catholic theologians in the opening decades of the 20th century. Unfortunately, this pope was much closer to the traditions of Pius IX and Pius X than to his namesakes. Instead of mitigating the absurdities of Vatican I's novel declaration of papal infallibility, a declaration that stemmed almost wholly from Pius IX's paranoia about the evils ranged against him in the modern world, John Paul II tried to further it. In seeking to impose conformity of thought, he summoned prominent theologians like Hans Kung, Edward

Schillebeeckx and Leonardo Boff to star chamber inquiries and had his grand inquisitor, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, issue condemnations of their work.

But John Paul II's most lasting legacy to Catholicism will come from the episcopal appointments he made. In order to have been named a bishop, a priest must have been seen to be absolutely opposed to masturbation, premarital sex, birth control (including condoms used to prevent the spread of AIDS), abortion, divorce, homosexual relations, married priests, female priests and any hint of Marxism. It is nearly impossible to find men who subscribe wholeheartedly to this entire catalogue of certitudes; as a result the ranks of the episcopate are filled with mindless sycophants and intellectual incompetents. The good priests have been passed over; and not a few, in their growing frustration as the pontificate of John Paul II stretched on, left the priesthood to seek fulfillment elsewhere.

The situation is dire. Anyone can walk into a Catholic church on a Sunday and see pews, once filled to bursting, now sparsely populated with gray heads. And there is no other solution for the church but to begin again, as if it were the church of the catacombs, an oddball minority sect in a world of casual cruelty and unbending empire that gathered adherents because it was so unlike the surrounding society.

Back then, the church called itself by the Greek word *ekklesia*, the word the Athenians used for their wide open assembly, the world's first participatory democracy. (The Apostle Peter, to whom the Vatican awards the title of first pope, was one of many leaders in the primitive church, as far from an absolute monarch as could be, a man whose most salient characteristic was his frequent and humble confession that he was wrong.) In using *ekklesia* to describe their church, the early Christians meant to emphasize that their society within a society acted not out of political power but only out of the power of love, love for all as equal children of God. But they went much further than the Athenians, for they permitted no restrictions on participation: no citizens and noncitizens, no Greeks and non-Greeks, no patriarchs and submissive females. For, as St. Paul put it repeatedly, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus."

Sadly, John Paul II represented a different tradition, one of aggressive papalism. Whereas John XXIII endeavored simply to show the validity of church teaching rather than to issue condemnations, John Paul II was an enthusiastic condemner. Yes, he will surely be remembered as one of the few great political figures of our age, a man of physical and moral courage more responsible than any other for bringing down the oppressive, antihuman Communism of Eastern Europe. But he was not a great religious figure. How could he be? He may, in time to come, be credited with destroying his church.

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