

Editorial

"A MAN SENT FROM GOD"

LESS THAN FIVE YEARS AGO the elderly Patriarch of Venice, Angelo Giuseppe Cardinal Roncalli, succeeded Pius XII in the papal chair. His election caused no great stir. It seemed obvious enough that the Sacred College had chosen a "caretaker" pope—a genial old man whose relaxed rule would permit an obvious successor to move into the limelight. It certainly did not occur to Christians outside the Roman Catholic Church that the new reign would have any extraordinary significance for them and for their churches.

When Pope John XXIII died at Pentecost, 1963, he was mourned by Christendom as no pope had ever been mourned. The world over, Orthodox, Protestants, and Anglicans hastened to join Roman Catholics in the Roman Church's ancient supplication: *Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat ei*. In Lambeth Palace chapel the Archbishop of Canterbury offered a memorial Eucharist. From pulpit and platform and in the press, dignitaries of Church and State paid tribute to Pope John as one of the greatest men of our era. In Italy a cardinal, soon to be raised in his turn to the papal throne, declared that the course charted by the late pope must be faithfully followed. In America another cardinal began to speak of his canonization. Even an atheist voice was heard from Moscow, praising his work for international peace. In four short years the "caretaker" of the papacy had somehow come to be recognized as the friend and defender of mankind.

It has been cynically suggested that John XXIII's great reputation was a triumph of public relations, and little more. But it took more than public relations to create the image of instinctive wisdom and simple goodness that the various media of communication transmitted from the Vatican to the world. The public image was good because the man himself was great, a man sent from God to speak a word of witness to our times.

John XXIII's outstanding quality as a religious leader was his remarkable ability to speak out of an august tradition to the manifold needs of the twentieth century. He was not a professional theologian, and yet his insight into the essential conditions of honest theological scholarship was clear and penetrating. He was not a revolutionary, bent on changing the shape of society in the name of a political theory, and yet he repeatedly confronted unwilling conservatives with the social needs and political aspirations of modern man. He was not a compromiser, willing to barter his church's convictions for the sake of a facile unity, and yet he broke through the age-old barriers of hostility and suspicion to establish a new and fruitful relationship between Roman Catholics and their "separated brethren." In

all that he did we see the marks of a great human personality opened wide to grace—a man firm in faith, humble before God, generous towards his fellows, courageous and creative just because his mind and heart were set on God's will and man's welfare, and on nothing else. What better commentary could there be on such a life than the familiar words of the Gospel: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John"?

No doubt it would be easy to exaggerate the practical consequences of his pontificate, out of admiration for the character of the man. The problems to which he addressed himself have not ceased to be problems. If anything, the task of Roman Catholic theologians will be harder, now that they have been summoned out of the safe shallows of "manual" theology into the perilous depths of biblical criticism and philosophical reflection. The work of Roman Catholic social thinkers will become more complex, as they try to follow the development of rapidly changing societies with understanding and a greater openness to their possibilities. The ecumenical situation will appear more complex than ever, as Roman Catholics add their quota of distinctive affirmations to the conversation among the churches.

But of course these problems were really there all along. John XXIII's achievement was that first of all he made churchmen face the issues and then effectively brought to the fore just those theologians who had long been alive to them and were best equipped to tackle them. Thanks to his wise and decisive action neither the theological atmosphere within the Roman Catholic Church nor the temper and the burden of theological exchanges between Roman Catholics and other Christians can ever again be what they so recently were. We can only be grateful to the Providence that so perfectly matched the man to the urgent needs of the hour.

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