

"A REBEL WITH A CAUSE"

INTRODUCTION

With or without a cause, modern rebels are caught up in conflict with what they term "the establishment". The "establishment" can mean anything representing the status quo - the school, the church, the home, the government - but generally it implies an institution with a certain amount of authority and tradition behind it.

On Tuesday afternoon, I was one of several Methodist ministers who met with a group of seminary students who are supporting the cause of the Young Lords in East Harlem, and in so doing shaking up some of the established churches of our city. The degree of justification in the modern revolt may vary, but basically, there is nothing really new about rebelling against the establishment. Indeed, the history of religion is filled with chapters of just such rebel activity. There seems to be a certain cycle in church history. The reformers come along and revitalize organized religion in their day, but then as the reformers acquire power and develop patterns, they represent a new establishment, and some further reformation is required. So again and again across the centuries, God has raised up some "rebel with a cause" to challenge the establishment. Francis of Assisi. Martin Luther. John Wesley. Each of them sounded a trumpet and led a crusade in his time.

There are others, too, maybe not as famous, but strong men of God who stood up and spoke out, often in conflict with the establishment. And when their influence could be assessed, it was clear that they had scraped some barnacles from the ship of organized religion and guided the ship on a straighter course. Today, on this Sunday which comes at the conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity - a week which has brought Catholic and Protestant people closer together - I should like to have us think about one of the great rebels of our own time, Pope John XXIII.

DEVELOPMENT

Of course, there's some risk involved when you try to measure the greatness of a man who has recently lived and died. History has a way of re-grading the marks that contemporaries give to their captains. It takes the distance of decades to get the real perspective on a person's nature, and so it may take some future generation to provide us with a clear estimate of the influence of a certain Pope who served as the head of his church for less than four years in the middle third of the 20th Century.

Nonetheless there is already some evidence that this was such a combination of a man with a moment as to give that man a unique place in history. Certain it is that Pope John XXIII has come across to his contemporaries, whatever their faith, as a great innovator of great integrity. It seems to us that we can say of him as the gospel writer said of an earlier spiritual giant, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John".

EARLY YEARS

The future Pope did not begin life however with the name, John. He was born Angelo Roncalli, in a decrepit farm house in northern Italy in the late autumn of 1881. His father was a tenant farmer on a large estate. There were thirteen children, ten of whom survived infancy. It hardly needs to be added that they were poor, and life was not easy. But if they were poor, so was practically every one else over that countryside. Says one biographer, "There were no Joneses to keep up with". And Pope John once looked back and said, "I grew up in an atmosphere of self-sufficient, blessed poverty, which makes few demands". And through it all, the members of that family were glad and happy and devout in their faith.

There is not the slightest evidence that Cardinal Roncalli expected or wanted the position of Supreme Pontiff of his church. He was almost 77 - and not only his age - but his great humility discouraged any such aspiration on his part, but the cardinals of the church, in cloistered convocation, proceeded to vote, and after the 11th ballot, it was announced to the world, "We have a Pope" - "He is the eminent Lord Cardinal Roncalli".

From the moment that he was elected Pope, he started breaking precedents. He chose the name, John, the first time in 550 years a pope had chosen that name, because it had been sullied by some pretender. But the new pope in 1958 thought it was a good name, and that it was! It had been traditional that the Pope eat his meals in solitude, but John rebelled against that, "I have gone all through the Old Testament and the Holy Gospel and I can't find a single word in them that says the Pope must eat alone. So I am not going to do it any more". He was forever upsetting plans and un-nerving planners by charging off in some unscheduled direction, as when on a visit to inspect a prison, he insisted on leaving the red carpet route, and meandering down corridors to get close to the prisoners. When one veteran prisoner knelt before him, the Pope embraced him with a great bear-hug, saying, "I looked into your eyes with my eyes. I have put my heart near your heart."

But it was not only his compassion that caught the world's attention. It was something new and re-newing about the man, in the conduct of his office, as Time magazine put it: "He did not tiptoe into his reign; he stomped in boldly like the owner of the place, throwing windows open and moving furniture about". He made some changes - and before anyone quite recognized what was happening, it became clear that the church and maybe the world would never be quite the same again.

Early in 1959, he ~~announced and~~ startled the world with the announcement that he was summoning an ecumenical council. He had ~~discussed the idea with only one of his advisors, and the people was~~ ^{were} convinced that the idea was the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. "Suddenly and unexpectedly" he said, "we were struck by the idea of this...like the first flower of an early Spring". One reason for the Council, as the Pope put it, was "to open the windows of the church to let in some fresh air" - a self-examination and updating of the Catholic Church and another reason was to further the cause of Christian unity among all Christians.

~~It took three and one-half years to make ready for the Council, but it convened at length in October of 1962.~~ The story of that Council is a drama in itself. To it came the bishops and cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church throughout the world. But to it also came observers from other churches, to find themselves treated as participants and as "brothers in Christ". The Pope set the tone for the Council when in his opening address, he asked forgiveness of the separated brethren and offered forgiveness to those who may have mis-judged his branch of the church.

It is much too early to assess the results of that Council. Some of the results however are evident in the changes within the Catholic Church - the new clarity in the liturgy, the new role of the laity, the deeper involvement of the church in the world. And certainly some of the changes are evident in some new attitudes and relationships between Christians of various brands and branches.

But Pope John was only to see the Council well-started on its course. He celebrated his 81st birthday and had a premonition that it might be his last. His rugged body grew weak and his great heart stopped beating on a Sunday night in

June of 1963. And in that strange alchemy of grief, the world knew that it was poorer without him and yet richer because of him.

GOODNESS

From our present perspective, two things - at least - stand out in this man's legacy to the world. One is the plain fact of his goodness. When you think about Pope John, you keep coming back to the word "good". He was a good man - and part of his appeal to the world was the absence of guile or pretense of duplicity.

He had the humor that goes with humility. Once when a famed Canadian photographer was taking his picture, the pontiff remarked, "If the Lord knew I was going to be Pope, wouldn't you think he would have made me more photogenic" - a sentiment shared by many of us not destined for the papacy. But most of all, he had the aura of goodness about him - and the world came to respect him because his goodness shone through.

Despite all the barbs that are aimed at goodness and decency, the world is still hungry for heroes who personify goodness. Because those heroes remind us that not in cleverness, nor sophistication, nor wealth, nor power is fulfillment of life - but in goodness. Someone like Pope John appears upon the scene - lives his faith, enjoys life, serves his fellow-man, and like his Lord before him, goes about doing good - and radiating goodness! Deep within our hearts is that which "hungers and thirsts for righteousness" and which gladly responds to the story of an Italian country boy become Pope, who lived his life in glad obedience to the Gospel of Christ, and who, plain and simple, was a good man!

RENEWAL OF CHURCH

The other part of his legacy would seem to be the renewal that he brought to the church. He summed up his stance on his 81st birthday when he said, "We are the wealthy heirs of the great lessons of the past, but we face a world which more than ever needs the grace of God in the evangelical sense. In our work, it's more important that we look to the future than the past".

This was a revolutionary thing to suggest. In the highest sense of the phrase, he was a rebel with a cause. He rebelled against the pomposity of the papacy. He rebelled against the rigid conservatism of the Curia. He rebelled against the isolation of the church from what was going on in the world. The truth is he did open the windows and let in some fresh air - air that has been blowing change throughout all the rooms of the church of Christ.

Nothing was closer to John's heart than the cause of Christian unity. The prayer that he kept repeating during the days that he was dying was the prayer of Jesus: "That they may all be one". And this was the prayer and the purpose of the days that he lived in the papal office. This did not mean that he was about to renounce the distinctive dogma of his tradition - or that he asked others to give up what was most important to them. He did not talk about church unity, as did some of his predecessors, simply in terms of the "return to Rome". Rather he said: "The road to unity of the various Christian confessions is charity, so little observed on either side".

He believe that with our common fatherhood of God and Lordship of Jesus Christ, we should be able to trust each other and to trust God to lead us along the road to unity. Certain it is that something has happened and is happening in the facing of some old bitterness and bigotry and the flowering of a new spirit, and some would say that God's greatest instrument in the change was that quaint old man who was given to hold and to turn some keys to the kingdom. And thanks be to God that in our time, as well as in an earlier time, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John...who came to bear witness to the light".

PRAYER: And now may that Spirit that was in thy servant, John, be also in us:
A spirit of goodness....and a desire for the unity of all God's
people. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen