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John XXIII by Peter Hebblethwaite

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JOHN XXIII. POPE OF THE COUNCIL. By Peter Hebblethwaite. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984 (American edition: POPE JOHN XXIII: Shepherd of the Modern World. New York: Doubleday, 1985). viii, 550 pages.

Peter Hebblethwaite, Vatican correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR), spent seven years on this 550-page biography of Angelo Roncalli, — as Pope John XXIII, the Pope of the Second Vatican Council. Even those who have learned to read Mr. Hebblethwaite's reports in the NCR with a good deal of caution and reserve will welcome this book, obviously a real labor of love.

Hebblethwaite's first four chapters take us through Papa Roncalli's village boyhood, his years as a seminarian at Bergamo, his studies and ordination in Rome, his service as secretary to the extraordinary Bishop Radini Tedeschi in Bergamo, his experiences with the "Modernist crisis" during the pontificate of Pius X. Hebblethwaite sees, in the Roncalli of those early years, a young man of intelligence and a certain breadth and intensity of spirit, with solid piety and an aspiration to holiness beyond the ordinary. He finds already that goodness, gentleness and the rich sense of the human which were to be such remarkable features of his years as Pope.

Hebblethwaite follows Roncalli through World War I (where he served as an army chaplain); through the activity and involvement of the ten years after WWI (in his late thirties he was regarded as a forceful and eloquent speaker with genuine leadership qualities); through his brief stint in Rome with the Propaganda Fidei offices, and finally his appointment as Apostolic Visitor to Bulgaria, which was preceded by his consecration as Archbishop (1925) when he was forty-four years old.

The Bulgarian assignment was the beginning of 27 years of service in the papal diplomatic corps. After Sofia he represented the Holy See in Turkey and Greece (1935-44), and from 1944 to 1952, at Paris under Charles de Gaulle. These were years of an invaluable broadening of horizons, and given Roncalli's very catholic mind and rich humanity, a period of enriching personal experience. In the presence of situations calling for great tact and judgment, his diplomatic service proved to be a time designed to test and temper his spirit. In January 1953, Roncalli was named Cardinal Patriarch of Venice by Pope Pius XII, the post he held when, in October 1958, he was elected to the Papacy in what Hebblethwaite calls a "wide-open conclave." Hebblethwaite makes one remarkable point, backed by good evidence, that Roncalli himself was less surprised than many others, and "the outside world," by his election as Pope.

The rest is history. As John XXIII, Angelo Roncalli, beginning his pontificate at seventy-seven, changed the face of the Papacy and in many ways, especially through the ecumenical Council he called, also the face of the

Church. Hebblethwaite's next ten chapters are his account and interpretation of the reign of "the good Pope John." They make fascinating reading, even if the reader has not infrequently to distance himself from the author's own personal biases.

That Roncalli was not just "a figure of bonhomie," but a truly great Pope of remarkable intelligence and personal gifts, whose rich and varied experience had been assimilated into a personality marked by great goodness and good sense, by much virtue and serenity, good humour joined to the "evangelical wisdom of the serpent," — this Hebblethwaite establishes solidly, and yet without uncritical hero-worship. Roncalli emerges as humanly quite knowledgeable and quite conscious of the complexity present in issues of thought as well as in human interrelationships and in matters of policy. Particularly notable were his all-inclusive charity and his "deep respect for everyone who was sincere and honest, even if mistaken." The powerful advance his pontificate and person made in relationships with the "separated brethren" was nothing short of a revolution which has yet to bear its full fruit.

In a review one can only note a few points of interest in Hebblethwaite's report on the Roncalli papacy. Hebblethwaite, after Alberigo, makes much of the opening address of 11 October 1962 (the first day of Vatican Council II), with its statement of the objectives of the *aggiornamento* and dialogue with the contemporary world which were central to the Council's significance for the Church. The crisis of November 1962 on the "two sources of revelations" was resolved by a bold move which was in fact a decisive early turning-point in the Council. "The Council was embarked on a new enterprise, respecting tradition, but adjusting it to the new world of thought and education." (Bishop B. C. Butler) Two influences on John merit attention: Cardinal Bea, in the areas of biblical studies and ecumenism, and Cardinal Montini, who (despite the age-difference) was greatly and deeply esteemed as a friend.

The last two chapters record the last six months of the Pope's life. He had cancer; he was a dying man, even if he kept at his work as much as his illness allowed him. With Easter Sunday, 14 April 1963, the last chapter (both of John's life and Hebblethwaite's book) begins. Hebblethwaite's almost day-by-day account of the pain and the patient endurance is a moving one. The final portrait of John, which emerges from these pages is, without need of embellishment, that of a man not only wonderfully lovable but also of authentic saintliness, one "in whom the Church and the world were prodigiously blessed."

Bishop B. C. Butler, formerly auxiliary in the see of Westminster, now retired, has said that "to read this volume not once but twice is an education in itself. . . . It is a book for all priests and for many others who need to understand the Council's programme for the future." One can readily agree with that judgment, while expressing some reservations. One such reservation,

a major one, needs to be noted here. The book's reviewer in *America* magazine (7 September 1985) has formulated it this way:

It is the problem of Vatican-reporting, of what sometimes can and sometimes cannot be documented, that causes the principal reservations about the book. Hebblethwaite cites his sources in a parenthesis following a particular discussion, but at times incidents and remarks are given without any source. One of the cited sources of the hard-to-verify Vatican words and deeds is of questionable reliability. The impression of an opposition between Pope and Curia as a dominating fact of the pontificate goes beyond what can be known with certainty. And in an almost relentlessly negative attitude toward Pope Pius XII, the author even tries to enlist as allies of his position two so unlikely candidates as Roncalli himself and Cardinal Augustin Bea. The extolling of Pope John XXIII has solid grounds without resorting to unfairness toward others. Also, Pope John XXIII's distinction and achievement do not need to rest on his having been prophetically all his life long what he was later to be as Pope, a theme that Hebblethwaite weaves throughout the book and that at times makes for some anachronistic thoughts and expressions.

Few books are around, in any language, which — twenty years after the end of Vatican II — can call up as effectively the experience of living through the pontificate of John XXIII, as Hebblethwaite's work. It is not *the* definitive biography, by any means. It is altogether too much H's own personal interpretation, even if it is remarkably detailed and well-researched, as well as written with a gifted journalist's enviable skills. But the 550 pages of small, tightly-packed print are well worth the time they demand. One hopes, especially for readers in this country, that a paperback edition may soon be available.

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CENTERS, SYMBOLS, AND HIERARCHIES: ESSAYS ON THE CLASSICAL STATES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA. Edited by Lorraine Gesick. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1983. xi, 241 pages.

This collection of six essays clearly addresses itself to a much debated concept of the state in Southeast Asia. The dynamic interplay of history and tradition in a region on which colonial and neocolonial relations have been imposed has compelled scholars to reevaluate the various assumption and categories in their interpretations of what would be characteristic of Southeast Asian states.