

Pope John, God's Jolly Revolutionary

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scattered world of Protestantism closer together and even bridging the gulf between Protestant and Eastern Orthodox, set up vibrations within the Roman fortress, and there were some cautious responses.

But caution was the word all along the line. The Curia sat at their desks, and it appeared that nothing radical could ever happen. At most, a few minor repairs, jobs and adjustments could be undertaken in the fabric of the eternal and essentially unchanging and unyielding Church.

The pressures mounted within the Roman Catholic world. Restless bishops and scholars chafed and fretted — particularly in northern and western Europe — and spoke as bravely as they could and still survive. But their plight seemed past hope.

If Trent had not spoken the last word, Vatican Council I in the nineteenth century had. The Pope was officially infallible; there was therefore no logical reason why he should ever call another council. And without a council, there was no central parliament where the half-suppressed voices of a secretly restless Church could be heard.

So it appeared until John became Pope.

It is easy to recall the glib comments of the journalists at that time. More pontifical than a pope, they assured us that John would be an "interim pope," a genial pastoral type who would serve out the few remaining years of his life without upsetting any ecclesiastical apple-cart, while the Church took a long look around and decided who the next "real pope" would be.

Some newspapers did indeed mention that John had been an able envoy of the Vatican in Turkey, the Balkans, and France, and there were those who said he would set a warmer, more human tone than his predecessor. But not one commentator seems to have had a premonition that the cardinals had grasped a tiger by the tail when they crowned the jolly old man from Venice.

Some men are too much of one piece to lend themselves to journalistic analysis. Such a man was John. To describe him sounds like an exercise in clichés. Quite simply, he believed in God, in Jesus Christ the Son of God, and in the people — everybody — for whom Christ died.

John was not a cloistered cleric who had never seen man's cruelty — after all, he had been through wars and observed them at close hand. He retained a hope, a conviction, that there was at least a divine spark of goodness in all men that made it possible for them to communicate, finally to love, across the barbed wire of religious and ideological minefields.

He was also convinced that the Church should cease to shiver with old fears and should look to its own renewal, and that a rejuvenated Church would somehow come into closer fraternity — perhaps ultimately into unity — with other Christians, and even arrive at mutual love and understanding with those to whom the word "Christ" means nothing.

In short, he was radically and incurably Christian. He believed the breathless promises of the Gospel — the very word means "good news" — and dared to act accordingly, with the peculiar freedom of those who have been liberated by Christ from mere common sense.

Thus it was that when the Holy Spirit told him to hold a council, he went ahead and held one without asking leave of the reverend fathers who

would eagerly and piously have dissuaded him. At an age when most Americans would have long since retired on social security, he embarked on an undertaking that would be roughly equivalent to calling a new constitutional convention in Philadelphia to deal with everything from reapportionment to the problem of pornographic literature.

Along the way he issued his few but momentous encyclicals, most notably the "Pacem in Terris — Peace on Earth." In this profound statement he took the entire human family for his diocese, and laid down more clearly than any secular statesman the preconditions and spiritual state requisite for nations and classes and colors and races to co-exist on one desperately small planet. Its message found a surprised and surprising response across various kinds of ideological curtains, and the ferment of the encyclical continues to work in many organized groups and individuals.

John lived to see only one session of the Council; it had accomplished little of tangible measure when he died. A Moses, he caught a glimpse of a promised land that others might be permitted to enter. Unlike Moses, he had no categorical and divine assurance that his people would ever actually be able to enter that land, or whether the forces of conservatism, at the Curia and supported by bishops from the more archaic Roman Catholic lands, would yet frustrate the brave efforts at "aggiornamento."

Under his successor — the much more introverted Pope Paul, a man who nonetheless appears equally dedicated to the inward renewal and outward reach of his Church — something has already been accomplished. The Mass is being celebrated in an English so crisply modern that a visiting Episcopalian flinches; the principle of collegiality has been established, elevating the status of bishops and setting the doctrine of papal infallibility in broader context.

Unthinkable subjects are being thought about. Undebatable questions are being debated. It was probably not on the original Council agenda that every Roman Catholic magazine should be running articles on birth control, but the spirit of freedom created by Vatican II has



A weary Pope John rubs his eyes during Vatican rite a few weeks before he died.



President Eisenhower had a hearty laugh from a remark by Pope John during 1959 audience.

broken even this taboo. And certainly the aggiornamento has gone very far in the direction of ecumenical brotherhood. Who would have guessed ten years ago that Roman Catholic and Episcopal priests would be exchanging pulpits, or that a Roman archdiocese would join a state council of churches?

One fears to become too hopeful, but as of this moment it does look as though Pope John started something that can be allowed down and partially hamstrung, but not stopped. He released the restless, creative forces within his Church; who can predict where the Spirit will lead that Church?

It is a sobering thought to non-Romans — perhaps especially to the decorous Anglicans of the world — that they may awake some day to find a Roman Church more adapted to the twentieth century, more burning with charity, less legalistic, less fossilized in organization, than their own communion. After the last General Convention, one wonders when, if ever, our old Protestant Episcopal Church will grant the Holy Spirit leave to inspire an aggiornamento in it.

But back to Pope John, the man who started it all. The books are pouring from the presses. Most of them sound as though the authors were overwhelmed by the magnitude of the subject.

John's secretary, Monsignor Loris Capovilla, has published "The Heart and Mind of John XXIII" (Hawthorn, \$5.95), writ-

ten in that style of purple prose and hifalutin piety that are trademarks of the Vatican City newspaper L'Osservatore Romano.

What the book says is often excellent, but the manner is irritatingly inflated: "Barely five years lie between the glorious day when the son of Bergamasque peasants was elevated to the Chair of St. Peter and the day when, surrounded by the anxious affection of the entire world, he gave up his soul to his Creator. . . ." The book brings out John's keen intelligence — a fact often overlooked in admiration of his goodness — but the monsignor sounds as though he beheld his employer through a swirling mist of incense, and still sees him through a haze of pious recollection.

Alden Hatch's "A Man Named John" (Hawthorn, \$4.95) has some excellent photographs, but the text is saccharine and oversimple, as if written for children with an unnatural degree of piety. Still, it does give the basic outline of John's life, and much information and countless episodes about the various periods.

Among the collection of "fioretto" is "Wit and Wisdom of Good Pope John," collected by Henri Fesquet (Kenedy, \$3.95). In this book one can see the raw materials of the future legend. Here are the human-interest anecdotes that poets and playwrights, and the unpredictable imagination of the general public, will elaborate. John's sense of humor is revealed as a by-product of his ability to love, which entailed a keen awareness of the incongruous contrast between tangible reality and any ideal. Being a loving man, he was able to laugh with rather than at.

Some of the episodes are too flat or trivial to merit inclusion, but there are others with a tang. One is the celebrated account of John's visit to the Regina Coeli prison in Rome, when in the course of his sermon he mentioned that one of his cousins had served a stretch for poaching. Other episodes are not funny at all, but tender and touching, such as the grief of the little blind boy because he could not see the Pope. John's answer was simply to sit at the edge of the bed for a long time with his arm around the boy.

The focus is more definitely on humor in "A Pope Laughs: Stories of John XXIII," collected by Kurt Klingner (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, \$3.95). There are some excellent photos here, and an anthology of episodes — a number of them fairly long and complicated — which bring

close closer than any biographer to revealing the haunting and tantalizing reality of a man who apparently found it possible to take Christ's promises at face value; a man who lived accordingly — with a quick chuckle, even a belly laugh, often punctuating occasions of piety.

There is an immense amount of valuable commentary here, not merely on the Council, but on such things as the encyclicals and the worker-priest movement. Incidentally, the author singles out the Archbishop of Canterbury's visit to Pope John as one of the genuine turning points of modern religious history.

So much for the five books. Others are doubtless in the manuscript stage, in proofs, going forth in reviewers' copies. One of the most hopeful things about this decade is that mankind's imagination has been so gripped by such a man as John; this in itself suggests that his Christian optimism was not based on an utterly false estimate of the human possibility.

Meanwhile the man himself recedes as all must into history; in his case, into the history he helped make.

The legends will grow and multiply and embody strange beauties of insight. Soon the novelists, the poets, and the playwrights will take over. There may be one among them who will fuse certain facts and uncertain "fioretto" and

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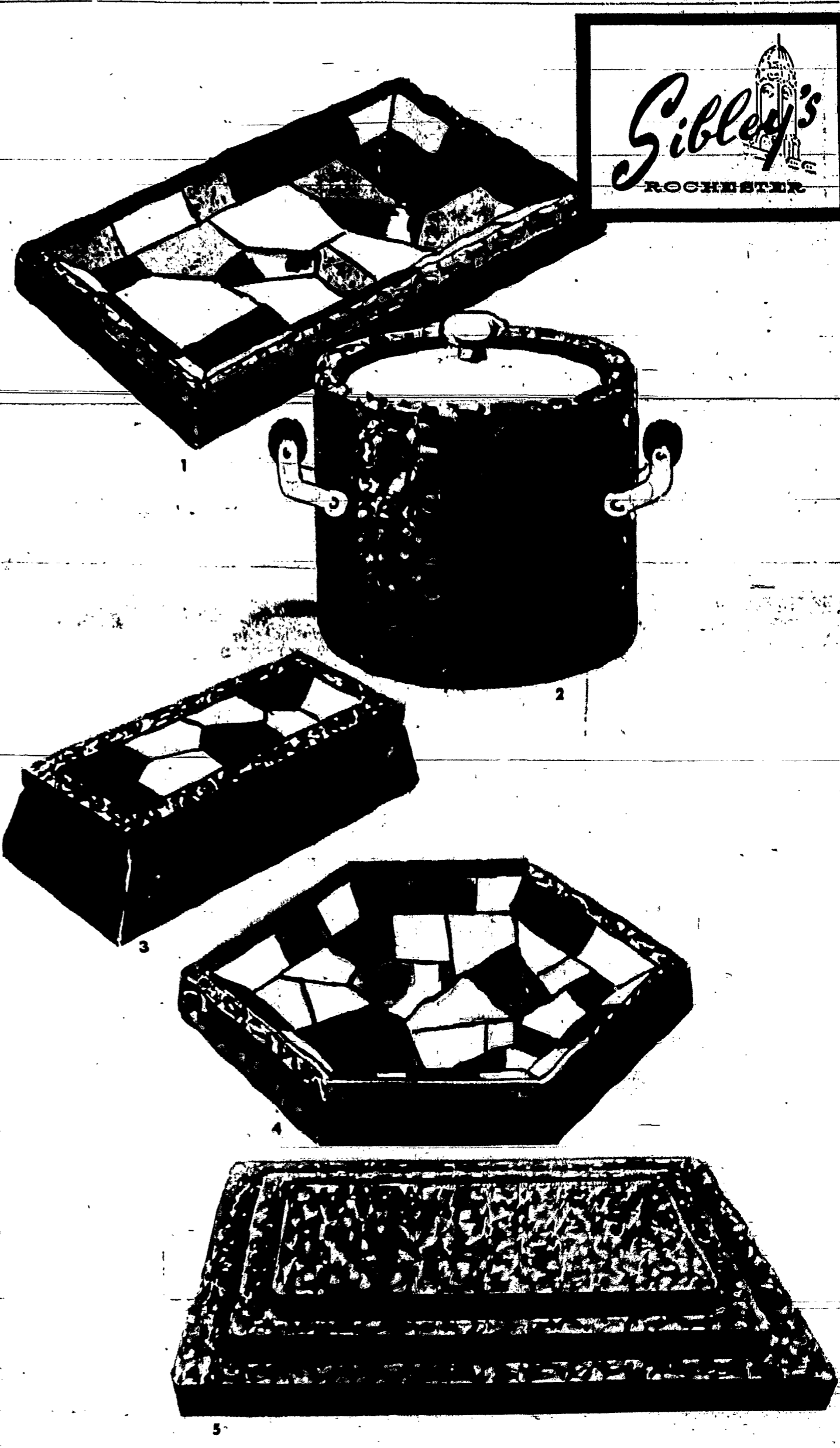
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