

FR. HENRY ATWELL

Toward Tomorrow



This month's Reader's Digest has a preview of a book soon to be published titled "Good Pope John." It's almost ten years since he died but his brief five years as Supreme Pontiff will shape the Church's future for at least the next five hundred years.

Not everyone thinks Pope John was "good" for the Church. I recall when he was near death. Radio bulletins hour by hour reported his deteriorating condition. One eminent churchman remarked to me "Perhaps this is the way God will solve the problem." For that clergyman, Pope John was so great a problem that God would have to kill him to remedy the damage he did.

I replied to that priest, "If you now credit God with solving the problem, don't you have to blame him for creating it in the first place?" He then stalked away in stony silence.

For me, and I hope for thousands more, Pope John was not a problem but a blessing far beyond anything we ever deserved.

I saw him but twice.

He certainly didn't look like Jesus but his very presence radiated everything Jesus taught us to be — gentle, simple, honest.

And while speaking of looks, there is an episode reported in the first days after Pope John became Pontiff.

Two lean and critical dowagers were at the Vatican for a papal ceremony. When the rotund Pope came along, one woman remarked to her companion, "He certainly doesn't look like a Pope." Pope John overheard the remark and replied, "My dear lady, the conclave which elected me was never intended to be a beauty contest."

And that was another asset of the Pope. He had a sense of humor, he didn't take himself too seriously.

But he did take his job most seriously and he knew it was a task far greater than his alone to do. That is why he convened that providential meeting

of the world's Catholic bishops — the Vatican Council.

Two of his other great contributions to us were his encyclicals 'Mater et Magistra' which voiced the Church's concern for the exploited poor, and then his brilliant 'Pacem in Terris,' which was far more than just a plea for peace but offered a blueprint for a world community in which people of diverse religious, political, racial and cultural backgrounds could live in security, freedom and dignity.

What a pity that the overwhelming majority of Catholics, clergy and laity alike, have simply ignored these directives. We have trivialized our faith haggling over handshakes at Mass and sectarian manipulation of our legislators.

Pope John and the world's bishops at his Council caught a glimpse of a world with liberty, but then clouds obscured the vision and we quickly sank back into days of gloom and doom again.

Pope John always had confidence another dawn would come. Even in his last days of life, when the doctor indicated no cure for him was possible, he said, "Ebbene (very well) — let God's will be done. But don't worry about me, because my bags are packed, I'm ready to go."

He marched to a different drum beat than we hear today.

We shuffle along with warnings and forebodings.

Perhaps, good Pope John will give us an anniversary gift — to hear once again what he heard, the trumpet call to look out through the windows he opened, to see the deep needs of people, to respond with courage and hope.

Pick up a copy of Reader's Digest and read about "Good Pope John." Just to read it will give you a spark of his mighty spirit.

FR. PAUL J. CUDDY

On The Right Side



On Nov. 12, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen was at Saint Vincent's Church, Corning. The occasion was to commemorate the June flood and devastation. Not only did he celebrate the 11 a.m. Mass, but he preached five different sermons at the five parish Masses; he distributed Holy Communion at all; and he was outside after Mass greeting the people. Although he preached five different sermons, each had the common theme of St. Paul's gospel: "I preach Christ and Him crucified."

I happened in on an informal gathering after the last Mass, and was astonished at the Archbishop's buoyancy. Most of us who would give even the same sermon five times would cheerfully be tucking in a couple eggs, toast and coffee, and headed for an hour's rest to recoup.

The archbishop was bouncing around with the energy of a colt and the zeal of Bernard of Clairvaux.

However, the archbishop is a polarizer. But so is Christ. Our Lord said: "He who is not with Me is against Me." Listening to the archbishop I thought: "His fiery candor will attract many disciples; but it will also bring him hostile critics within the Church." From his remarks you can see why.

Academies: Archbishop Sheen said that since leaving Rochester he has spoken at 42 secular colleges and universities, but not at one Catholic college or university. He commented dryly, "I have never been invited. No Catholic college or university has ever invited me, with one exception."

Newman Centers: Some one asked "Were you invited by the Newman Communities or by the administrations?" He shot back "By the administrations, of course. Newman chaplains rarely even come to my lectures."

Religious Habits: "Recently I gave a retreat to 700 religious sisters, all wearing their religious habits." He elucidated his thoughts on ditching the habit. "The enemies of the Church have always done what they could to get rid of the religious habit, because it is a sign of witness to Christ. Look at Mexico. Even to this day it is forbidden by law, a law made under a Communist regime, to wear the habit." Do you

think this candor will not bring polarization?

Mother Teresa: As the archbishop spoke of the disintegrating of many religious communities (he pointed out the Immaculate Heart of Mary congregation in California as a sad example) one priest asked, "What do you think some of the new orders will be like, to replace the ones that are disappearing?" He replied, "We have had one which began only 20 years ago. The Missionary Sisters of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa in India. I have known Mother Teresa and her community for 15 years. Their strength comes from prayer and contemplation. One day each week is set aside by the Sisters for prayer, contemplation and silence. No matter what activities are demanding attention, that day is kept inviolate. Our young people are looking for a challenge. Mother Teresa doesn't lack for vocations. She gives them the challenge of the Cross. In fact, she has so many applications to her community that she has to turn some away."

Something Beautiful for God: a book about Mother Teresa and her community written by a non-Catholic, Malcolm Muggeridge, the Bishop recommended "as an inspiring description of the spirit of this sisterhood which is new, but faithful to the Catholic spiritual traditions.

For what it's worth, my own thinking is this. Within the Church we have two polarities. One pole has its eye on the transcendent God, visible and knowable in the historic Jesus Christ, who continues His work of sanctification and service through His Church.

The opposite pole has its eye on the ego, self. Dom Hubert Van Zeller's latest book, *Leave Your Life Alone*, describes this spirit thus: "If our age has one besetting problem at its center, that problem is excessive self-awareness, and convoluted self-consciousness which can paralyze most of us at the most important levels of our lives."

A theology of self-centeredness, of exaggerated existentialism, is the pole quite opposite to the traditional God-centeredness of Catholic ascetical tradition — Christ and Him crucified — which has been practiced by the saints for 2,000 years.

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