

Jan. 25, 1959

# The Day a Pope Surprised Even Himself... and Changed History

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New York -- Twenty years ago, on Jan. 25, 1959, Pope John XXIII surprised everyone, including himself, by announcing that he would convene an ecumenical council, the first in nearly a century and only the 21st in the Catholic Church's 2,000-year history.



"The first to be startled by my proposal was myself," the pontiff later wrote in the diary. "The idea of a council did not ripen in me as the fruit of a long meditation but came forth like the first flower of an early spring."

Looking back at the monumental changes in Catholic attitude and practice wrought by the Second Vatican Council, the millions of words and the variety of ideas poured out in council discussions by the world's 2,300 bishops, the numerous volumes written by Catholic, Protestant and Jewish commentators on Vatican II developments, a person who checks press and wire service records of 20 years ago is startled by the guarded reaction that greeted Pope John's historic announcement.

There was indeed a wave of complete and excellent media coverage but after the initial wave crashed, there was limited response.

The records simply do not support the hyperbole of one papal biographer that the Pope's call "sent a surge of hope and zeal throughout the world." The actual response was more like a ripple, positively but cautiously hailed in generic terms, such as, hopeful, interesting, welcomed and potentially significant.

The late Cardinal Richard Cushing of Boston, whose own outlook was an American version of Angelo Roncalli's, was one of the few U.S. prelates to respond publicly. Explaining that the council of "Good Pope John" would blunt the impetus of communism's atheistic threat, the cardinal said that Vatican II aimed to reunite Christians and "would encourage the world to return to God."



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The cautious reaction can be partially explained by Pope John's cautious style.

Only one of the 17 cardinals who gathered with the pontiff on that eventful day to celebrate the feast of St. Paul in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Wall in Rome had an inkling.

He was Cardinal Dominico Tardini, the Vatican's secretary of state, with whom Pope John had shared his inspiration just five days previously.

The others had no forewarning. Nor had there been any indication to the world press that an important announcement would be made by the 77-year-old Pope who had been elected less than three months previously.

Nor did the first part of the Pope's traditional state of the Church address raise any eyebrows.

The pontiff noted that "the new Pope is being watched in many quarters with friendship and devotion, in others with hostility or hesitation." The Bishop of Rome then painted a picture of the Catholic Church in his diocese and in the world in contrasting colors of promise and problems.

How should the Church multiply the prospects and diminish the peril, he asked in effect.

He offered a daring and dramatic answer: "Though admitting trembling with emotion, yet at the same time with a humble resoluteness of purpose, we pronounce before you the name and plan of this double consultation, a diocesan synod for Rome and an ecumenical council for the universal Church."

That was it. No date. No advance plan. No details.

Recalling the lack of initial Catholic response to the papal initiative, Msgr. George G. Higgins, the veteran secretary for research of the U.S. Catholic Conference and the first American appointed to the council's preparatory commission, said, "We were historically illiterate. We had no experience of what a council meant, or what it would be like."

Msgr. Higgins explained that most people, including himself, missed the key word in the Pope's message -- consultation. "We had been conditioned to think of popes teaching, not asking questions. Not even bishops had much, if any experience of consultation with the Vatican," he said.

Momentum slowly built during the three years between Pope John's announcement and the opening of the first session of the council on Oct. 11, 1962. Impetus and imagination were fueled by the pontiff's continuing, incisive revelations of his intent. Aggiornamento updating, need to read the signs of the times, a pastoral rather than a doctrinal council.

But his most memorable expression was recorded by a papal visitor who asked the Pope's purpose: "The council?" Pope John said, pointing to a window and gesturing to open it, "I expect a little fresh air from it."

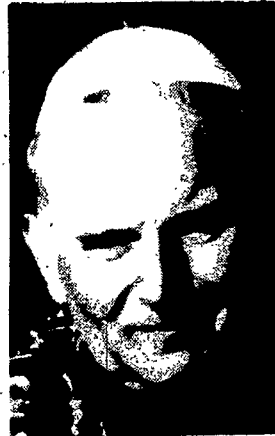
Pope John did not live to promulgate a single one of the Second Vatican Council's 16 texts. He died June 3, 1963, after the first session, but the momentum he created lives on.

No more proof is needed than to note that on Jan. 25, a successor who had adopted the name of John Paul II will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the calling of Vatican II, not in Rome, but 6,000 miles away in the Dominican Republic while on the way to personally convene a crucial Conference of Latin American Bishops in Mexico.

## An Address to Catholic Action

On Dec. 30, Pope John Paul received in audience about 30 thousand members of Italian Catholic Action. Following is an excerpt from the pontiff's address on that occasion.

In order to be able to use really one's time and one's capacities for the salvation and sanctification of souls, the first and principal mission of the Church, it is necessary to possess, above all, certainty and clarity about the Truths that must be believed and practiced.



If one is insecure, uncertain, confused, inconsistent, one cannot construct. Today particularly it is necessary to possess an enlightened and convinced faith, in order to be enlightening and convincing. The phenomenon of mass "culturalization" calls for a deep, clear and certain faith. For this reason I exhort you to follow faithfully the teaching of the Magisterium. In this connection, how could I fail to recall the words of my predecessor John Paul I in his first and only broadcast on Aug. 27, 1978? He said:

"Overcoming the internal tensions, which may have been created here and there, rejecting the temptations to conform with the tastes and morals of the world, as well as the titillation of easy applause, united in the one bond of love which must inform the inner life of the Church as well as the external forms of her discipline, the faithful must be ready to bear witness to their own faith before the world: 'Be ready at all times

to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you."

Today, more than ever, great prudence and balance are necessary because, as St. Paul already wrote to Timothy, we are tempted to follow sound doctrine no longer and to "wander into myths."

Do not let yourselves be intimidated or distracted, or confused by partial or erroneous doctrines which then leave you disappointed and empty of all fervor from Christian life.

Only he who has can give; and the Catholic Action militant is such precisely in order to give, to love, to enlighten, to save, to bring peace and joy. Catholic Action must aim resolutely at holiness.

Every commitment, even if it is of the social and charitable type, must never forget that what is essential in Christianity is the Redemption, that is, that Christ may be known, loved and followed.

Commitment in holiness implies, therefore, austerity of life, serious control of one's tastes and choices, constant commitment in prayer, an attitude of obedience and docility to the directives of the Church, both in the doctrinal, moral and pedagogical field as well as in the liturgical one.

What St. Paul wrote to the Romans holds good also for us, men of the 20th century: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Today men are in particular need of a smile, kindness, friendship. The great technical and social achievements, the spread of prosperity and of the permissive and consumer mentality, have not brought happiness. Divisions in the political field, the danger and the reality of new wars, continual calamities, implacable diseases, unemployment, the danger of ecological pollution, hatred and violence and the many causes of despair, have unfortunately created a situation of continual tension and neurosis.

What must Catholic Action do? Bring the smile of friendship and goodness to everyone, everywhere.

Error and evil must always be condemned and opposed; but the man who falls or who errs must be understood and loved.

Recrimination, bitter and polemical criticism, complaints, are of little use; we must love our time and help the man of our time.

Concern for love must spring continually from the heart of Catholic Action, which, before the cradle of Bethlehem, meditates on the immense mystery of God who became man just out of love for man.

St. Paul, again, wrote in the letter to the Romans: "Love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honor... Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep... Repay no one evil for evil."