

COMMENT

When I was a child we used to be told, by way of a cautionary tale against presumption, that there had sometimes even been Bad Popes; but the truth is that there are no Good Popes. This is not for lack of saintly and competent men, but because being a pope is an intrinsically impossible job. There are two different, and for practical purposes, incompatible job-descriptions to the papacy. On the one hand the pope is bishop of Rome, on the other he has care of all the churches. Every pope (and, more noticeably, everyone who offers advice to the pope) places his emphasis on one of these aspects and necessarily neglects the other.

From the first point of view, the pope should above all cultivate his own garden as pastor and servant of the people of Rome, and should allow other bishops to cultivate theirs. This vision of the papacy sees Rome as having a spiritual primacy, as guardian of tradition and touchstone of orthodoxy rather than as the administrative centre for a world-wide organisation. It is a view favoured by those impressed by the damage that has been done in the past by the over-centralisation of the church and by insensitive interference by Rome in matters better determined by people on the spot. Such a view is naturally congenial to Christians of confident and well-established churches such as those of Europe or North America whose bishops and people feel, rightly, that they know more about local conditions than could any pope advised by curial officials in the Vatican. It is a view, incidentally, that *New Blackfriars* has put forward in the past. It is also clearly the position of the theologians and others (for the most part European) who circulated a document before the conclave on the criteria for a new pope: "He should extend concrete competence to the episcopal conferences and the diocesan councils. He should give up the principle of centralism in the church. . . ."

The other view sees the papacy primarily in its international aspect. If in your own area you are relatively weak or under attack it is very important to be linked with the church throughout the world. For one thing, your chances of being tortured or killed are that much less if there is an international organisation of protest ready to hand. If you are a progressive bishop the appeal to Rome may be a useful lever against your more reactionary colleagues. The churches of Latin America and Asia persecuted by

reactionary regimes, the churches of Eastern Europe regarded with suspicion by 'socialist' governments as probable sources of dissent, and in general, churches that are weak or struggling look to Rome for moral, political and sometimes even financial support. The Third World churches cannot yet afford all the luxuries of independence and autonomy.

Obviously there is good sense in both these positions, but no pope has ever found a way of combining them, nor is any likely to. His task is essentially one of muddling through; he cannot have a clear policy unambiguously acceptable to, say, progressive Catholics. Paul VI, for example, will surely come to be seen as one of the really great popes. Whatever the limitations of his Euro-Catholicism, he found a church still tainted with a right wing bias and, in a prodigious achievement, swung it to its present openness to socialism—for what other pope could there have been declared three days of national mourning in Cuba? And yet, such were the contradictions of his reign that he will probably for quite a while be mainly remembered for the disaster of *Humanae Vitae*.

The best a pope can do is play it by ear, and there are some grounds for thinking that the Cardinal Patriarch of Venice has an open ear. When he was elected, journalists complained that nobody had heard of him. But what matters is not what people have heard of him but what he has heard of people, and he does seem a man capable of adjusting to reality. He has, politically, a fairly right-wing past (documented carefully in that most valuable book *The Inner Elite*, by Gary MacEoin and the Committee for the Responsible Election of the Pope. Kansas City. \$ 12.95) but he has also seen his own area of Venice switch dramatically from being a centre of conservative catholicism to enthusiastic support for a left-wing regime and was able himself to switch from whole-hearted support for the Christian Democrats to advocacy of an alliance with the Communists. He seems a man humbly able to capitulate to the facts and with an ear open to change in the facts. Perhaps a listening man is what today we most need in the chair of Peter.

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