

THE HISTORIC ROLE OF 20th CENTURY POPES

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Russell Shaw, *Eight Popes and the Crisis of Modernity* (Ignatius Press)

Today we turn on the Internet to do our research. Those researching the Catholic Church would find their job easier if they simply called Russell Shaw. Not for nothing do I call him a walking encyclopedia of the Catholic Church.

Shaw has done it again. *Eight Popes and the Crisis of Modernity* is a masterful overview of how eight popes affected the Church and left their mark on world history in the 20th century.

Shaw blends the historical record with interesting anecdotes, never shying from making fair criticisms, while always showing respect for the men who are his subject. His own faith shines through.

Pope Saint Pius X (8/4/1903–8/20/1914) is known for “standing firm against the inroads of a modernity devoid of faith that he saw as the deadly foe of the ancient Church.” He was confronted, as Shaw rightly points out, with a world where the efforts of Darwin, Marx, and Freud left an intellectual trail of militant secularism in their wake. The pope could either succumb to the zeitgeist or confront it. We are fortunate that he chose to fight it.

It may be, as the future Pope Benedict XVI has said, that Pius X was “over-zealous,” but the deck was clearly stacked against the Church. That is why he responded to agnosticism with an Oath for priests. The Church was engulfed in a blitz of secular attacks, and not to insist on fidelity was not

something the pope would chance. Meanwhile, he never sought to disengage the Church from the world around him, for had he done so, 4,618 French priests would not have died fighting in World War I.

Under Pope Benedict XV (9/3/1914–1/22/1922), the Church had no place at the table when the Treaty of Versailles was held following the war, which meant, as Shaw notes, “at least no one could blame the pope for the disastrous peace that was no peace that emerged from the talks.” While the pope continued to resist the worst elements of modernity, he was, understandably, consumed with World War I and its aftermath.

It was under his pontificate that the “Roman question” was first broached. The issue of how to deal with the relationship between the papacy and the Italian government had been on the back burner—it dated to 1870 when Italian troops seized Rome and Pius IX sought refuge behind Vatican walls—but the time had come to seek reconciliation.

Benedict was against the war, and while he did not take sides, he authorized humanitarian efforts. He also opposed the harsh reparations that the Versailles accord mandated, proving that he was more prescient than secular leaders who put the squeeze on Germany. Shaw is right to mention that the events of Fatima in 1917 happened on his watch, even if he had no direct role in them.

If his predecessors were faced with serious threats, Pope Pius XI (2/6/22–2/10/39) was faced with monumental ones. The Great Depression and the rise of the totalitarian twins—fascism and communism—set off the alarms everywhere. So did the moral collapse that paved the way for Hitler in the Weimar Republic. The pope responded by unapologetically defending the Church’s sexual ethics.

The pope’s response to the economic crisis was to criticize both socialism and capitalism, though by promulgating the

principle of subsidiarity—those closest to events are best suited to address them—he tilted away from the social engineering and consolidation of power that marks socialism.

Pius XI fought the anti-Semitism of Hitler's regime. He issued an important encyclical condemning racism and anti-Semitism, *Mit Brennender Sorge* (With Burning Concern), that was smuggled into Germany; priests read it from the pulpit. He also condemned the Soviet regime and the threat it posed to the Catholic Church.

Catholic League members are well aware of the yeoman work of Pope Pius XII (3/2/39–10/9/58), one of the most maligned figures in the 20th century. It was he who played a major role in writing his predecessor's encyclical against anti-Semitism. His first encyclical was a fierce denouncement of the German and Soviet invasions of Poland, and their immense threat to human rights. He also kept his eye on Soviet ambitions in Eastern Europe.

Now that the Vatican archives on World War II are open, it is hoped that the distortions and out-and-out lies about Pope Pius XII will be put to rest. No leader in the world, religious or secular, did more to stand up to Hitler and save Jews than the pope. The lies that began with the KGB and made their way into a despicable play, *The Deputy*, have already been written about by Ronald Rychlak and others, but now they will be given new light.

The pope could have been more outspoken, but to what end? The Dutch bishops who spoke up triggered a vicious Nazi reaction, which is why Jews pleaded with the pope not to be too strident in his condemnations. Pius XII played it smart: everyone knew where he stood, and that is why he chose to be prudent in his resistance. Once the war was over, he issued his infallible edict on Our Blessed Mother's bodily Assumption into heaven.

Pope Saint John XXIII (10/28/58–6/3/63) launched Vatican II,

which Shaw says was “perhaps the most *religious* event” of the 20th century. It certainly was a momentous one. Indeed, it has been the subject of much distortion, and much debate, the result of which was to transform the Church on many fronts. It pitted traditionalists against reformers.

Was Vatican II necessary? Some said it was—the Church needed to confront new challenges—while others questioned the logic of fixing something that wasn’t broken. Would an ecumenical council clarify or complicate matters? “One of the few things everyone agrees on is that the council was followed by a period of intense and sometimes raucous controversy and dissent,” Shaw notes, “a dismaying number of noisy defections from the priesthood and religious life, numerous flagrant abuses in liturgical practice, and much else of a similarly alarming nature.”

The fact that we cannot agree today on what Vatican II did is not a good sign. There are the “textualists” who insist on fidelity to the sixteen documents as written, and those who speak about the “spirit of Vatican II”; they prefer a more elastic interpretation. Some in the “spirit” camp, unable to justify their grandiose vision by appealing to the text, took a rather boundless approach. This philosophical split led to major divisions within the Church. They still exist.

The war within the Church hit a new high with the papacy of Pope Saint Paul VI (6/21/63–8/6/78). The “spirit of Vatican II” devotees hit stride. It was a time when the Church sought to maintain allegiance to traditional moral values while the Western world railed against them. Some of the priests and nuns who sided against the Church left their ministry and joined the ranks of the laity; others stayed put and rebelled from the inside.

Much has been written about the cultural fallout of *Humanae Vitae*. If more of the critics actually read the encyclical, there would be fewer of them. It was a brilliant statement on

the need to preserve marriage and the family, with a particular concern for the sexual exploitation of women. But in the minds of secular-leaning ideologues, it was an antiquated document that made little sense in the Age of Aquarius.

Pope John XXIII had established a commission to advise the Vatican on what to do about artificial birth control, lifting the expectations of reformers. When Paul VI turned down their advice and ratified the status quo, it set off a firestorm. "Looking back," Shaw writes, "it is clear that *Humanae Vitae* could hardly have come at a worse time. In 1968 a cultural—and sexual—revolution was well underway in the United States and other countries, creating a tidal wave of rebellion that threatened to sweep aside whatever smacked of authority and tradition." He does not exaggerate.

Pope John Paul I (8/26/78–9/28/78) served for only thirty-three days before being taken by the Lord, so he obviously didn't have time to leave his mark. With good reason, he is not counted among the eight popes that Shaw chose to write about.

John Paul I was succeeded by a towering figure in the annals of the Catholic Church. Pope Saint John Paul II (10/16/78–4/2/05) was a first-class intellectual and a man of enormous courage. The youngest pope since Pius IX, he terrified the Soviet Union. His historic trip to his native Poland in 1979 set the stage for the ultimate demise of the U.S.S.R. When he told the millions who turned out to see him live or on television, "Be Not Afraid," those in the Kremlin, as well as the Polish people, knew what he meant. The communist dictators were placed on life support.

The pope made five trips to the United States promoting interreligious harmony. His authorization of a new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was well received by everyone, save for the "spirit of Vatican II" crowd. Those who tried to portray

him as outdated were knocked on their heels when he audaciously published the "Theology of the Body," a cogent and original interpretation of human sexuality.

To my mind, John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* ranks with the greatest expositions on liberty ever written. His sociology was as impressive as his theology. Though it is not certain whether he wrote this partly as a rebuke of John Stuart Mill's 1859 essay "On Liberty," it certainly had that effect on me. Mill was top heavy on individual rights, paying lip service to individual responsibilities. For John Paul II, they were bound together.

The Soviet-inspired assassination attempt in 1981 by a Turkish gunman took a toll on him in many ways, but to our benefit he rebounded nicely. Beloved by millions across the globe, Pope Saint John Paul II was an extraordinary man.

The Catholic Church's role in shaping the world in the 20th century is the story of some very determined men faced with incredible challenges, both inside and outside the Church. They had their weaknesses, but they also rose to the occasion and delivered some of the most timely and effective encyclicals ever written. They were also leaders on the world stage, pioneers for natural law and natural rights.

Combating moral destitution in a world where freedom is defined as genital liberation is not easy. This was evident in Weimar Germany, and it is evident in Western societies today. The Church is called to pursue the truth, not fashion, making it an outlier among global institutions.

Similarly, combating the rise of genocidal regimes, especially under Hitler and Stalin, is something that our supreme leaders did not shy away from; they handled themselves with wisdom and honor.

Russell Shaw has given us a book that is informative and easy to read. It will make Catholics proud of the eight popes who

faced adversity in the last millennium, and succeeded in doing so.