

Biography as Theology: Hebblethwaite's Pope

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The time is right for a good biography of Pope John XXIII. It is, of course, ridiculous that the Catholic Church—all 780 million of us, as I recently read—should be so decisively affected by the personality of a single man. It is only with the invention of railways, telephones, aeroplanes, and now television, that the solitary in the Vatican has acquired such power. The ‘modern world’, which Pius IX sought to keep at arm’s length from the Papal States, soon provided the media for an unprecedentedly intense personal veneration of the ‘Holy Father’. The successor of Peter now enjoys a supremacy in the Church that Peter himself evidently never had (see Acts 8:14 and 11:2, and Galatians 2:11). With the triumph of Ultramontanism, the whole body has been surrealistically distorted by a grotesquely inflated ear (I Corinthians 12:17). The traditional ecclesiology of the Catholic Church as the communion of local churches has been re-established in *theory*—but, for the most part, we remain captured, and captivated, by media-promoted adulation of the individual. The power of the ‘world’ over the Catholic Church is as insidious as ever.

One of the worst effects of media domination is instant oblivion for yesterday’s men. In longer historical perspective, of course, the tolerance and the initiatives of Paul VI will seem obvious. At present, with men in control who cannot see the other side of a question, he is remembered only as a rather sad and dithering figure. His predecessor, in turn, is remembered as a fat old man with big ears who was too optimistic, or too stupid, to foresee the problems that would be caused by his pet ideas—being soft on communists and Protestants, and determined to hold a general council for *aggiornamento* in the Church. (To experienced churchmen, optimism and stupidity often seem synonymous.)

Peter Hebblethwaite’s new biography of John XXIII¹ will obviously remain the standard text in English for many years to come. He writes generously of Meriol Trevor’s *Pope John*, published in 1967—“on the basis of the material available at that time, the best biography in English”. Since then however, much more source material has become accessible. Monsignor Loris Capovilla, who was Pope John’s secretary in Venice and in the Vatican, helped a great deal with this book—although he “will perhaps not like some of it”.

Further material is bound to come to light, but it is hard to imagine how the story, in any important respect, would be altered. The only part of the book that leaves the reader unsatisfied is the chapter on Roncalli's years as papal nuncio in Paris—and access to further material might well only deepen the obscurity. For the rest, and on the essential reason for his being in Paris at all, this biography reconstructs Pope John's life in fascinating, moving and entertaining detail. It is a good read—perhaps sometimes too chatty—as well as a definitive account. It is also a rehabilitation of a great, as well as a good, man. He still has the big ears, and he was already fat as a young priest, but the optimism came out of a deep sense of history, and it cost a great deal in personal suffering.

The outline of the story is well enough known. Angelo Roncalli was born in 1881, the fourth of twelve children. The family were share-croppers about ten miles from Bergamo, in Lombardy, where the cold winds come down off the Alps—Milan is about forty miles away, the principal city in the region. People at the time were having to emigrate in large numbers to Argentina and the United States. Many countries remain strongly regional in character, but Italy had been politically united only since 1861. Apart from four years of study in Rome (1901–05), Roncalli remained in Bergamo until he was nearly forty. During the compulsory year of military service, which he hated, he went home every week-end. In 1905 he got his first job, as secretary to the Bishop of Bergamo. In 1915 he was called up, and stationed as a hospital orderly in Bergamo. There can be no doubt that the experience of tending wounded and dying soldiers marked him for life. As a priest in the Bergamo diocese, as Peter Hebblethwaite insists, he inherited a tradition of north Italian Catholicism which had, since the Council of Trent, been 'reforming' in character. His major scholarly interest, begun when he was the bishop's secretary and completed only in 1957, was an edition of the works of St Charles Borromeo, the great reforming bishop of Milan. He can seldom have thought of himself as an 'Italian'—whatever *that* may be: again and again, it comes out that he thought of himself as a man from *Bergamo*. His Catholicism was 'Roman' only to the extent that he had the new personal veneration for the incumbent of the Roman see that had become fashionable.

In 1907 Roncalli undertook part-time teaching in the local seminary. In the same year the encyclical *Pascendi* appeared, inventing 'Modernism' as a system (as Hebblethwaite says), in order better to condemn it. In the context, young Roncalli's lecture in memory of Cesare Baronius, the Oratorian who became the most famous of all Vatican librarians, was a brave refusal of the option between dogmatic fideism and scientific scepticism. He managed to keep his head—and his job—as a church historian, in 'the whirlwind

of Modernism’.

In 1919 he wrote as follows: “I must confess that the older I get, the less I like the Roman atmosphere. I’m like a pilgrim here; and even though there is a lot of good to be done, I wouldn’t want to live here”. A year later, at the age of thirty-nine, he joined the Curia in Rome, with an office at Propaganda Fidei, the dignity of *Monsignore*, and his sisters Ancilla and Maria as housekeepers in a flat near the railway station. There he remained as the non-Communist Socialists, otherwise known as Fascists, took over the government of Italy.

In 1925 it looked as if promotion in the Curia was in the offing. His eyes still filled with tears a week after he had been appointed apostolic visitor to Bulgaria, but he had been assured that he would soon be sent to Argentina, which would be more like home. In accordance with the rather dubious Roman practice in respect of diplomats, he was ordained archbishop, in Rome, in the Milanese church dedicated to St Charles Borromeo. It turned out that it was the then Vatican librarian, an ex-cavalry officer named Tisserand, who had been rummaging in Sofia for manuscripts and rare books from monasteries abandoned because of the War, who suggested to the Holy See that an envoy should be dispatched to find out about the tiny minority of Catholics in Bulgaria.

Roncalli rented a house in his native village in Bergamo and installed his two sisters there (they never married). He was now forty four. From 1925 until 1958, as Peter Hebblethwaite says, he hopped on and off the Orient Express at Milan, on his way to and from Sofia, Constantinople, Paris, and finally Venice. There was never much reason to go to Rome. “In the train”, he told his less sophisticated sisters, “you can relax, read, pray, observe the beauties of nature and the variety of people”.

He was the first papal representative in Bulgaria for five hundred years. There were some 62,000 Catholics, of whom 14,000 were Uniates of the Slavonic rite, living in the mountains. Travelling sometimes by mule and floating over rivers on a raft, Roncalli made it his first pastoral duty to visit them. It took diplomacy to reconcile them with the majority of Latin-rite Catholics in the country. This was also his first experience with the ancient churches of the East. He seems to have read *Irénikon* from its earliest days, and was to cite it in his first papal letter on ecumenism. Bulgaria opened him to what would much later become known as ‘the ecumenical spirit’. He had a friendly meeting with the Patriarch in 1927. But the Vatican was evidently more concerned about the royal family. King Boris, who had been brought up as a Catholic, had had to turn Orthodox to have his throne. In 1930 he married an Italian princess but, after the Catholic ceremony, they broke their promise and had a grand Orthodox wedding in Sofia. Worse was yet to come—they had their children

baptised as Orthodox. Pope Pius XI is said to have been so angry when the heir to the Bulgarian throne received Orthodox baptism that, on his next visit to Rome, he kept Archbishop Roncalli kneeling in front of him for forty five minutes, as a penance.

Early in 1929 he thought that he had a good chance of becoming archbishop of Milan. To many people at the time he seemed the natural choice. It was the first appointment under the Concordat, and Mussolini therefore had a say. The decision took six months—always a sign of disagreement behind the scenes. The abbot of the Benedictine monks of St Paul's outside the Walls, who proved friendly to Fascism, was given the job. Roncalli wrote to congratulate him, apologizing that, although he was to be at home in Bergamo, a previous engagement prevented him from gracing the enthronement in Milan.

In 1935 he was transferred to Constantinople. From the start he set himself the task of uniting the 35,000 Catholics in the neighbourhood of Istanbul. They were of a bewildering variety of races, languages, and rites. Few priests, then or since, ever have such experience of the immense diversity of the churches in communion with Rome. His second task was to make friends with the 100,000 or so Orthodox Christians who still clustered round the Phanar. In 1939, returning the Patriarch's good wishes when Pope Pius XII was elected, Roncalli made an official visit to the Phanar and the two prelates exchanged the kiss of peace. It must have been about nine hundred years since Constantinople and Rome had embraced.

He had less success with Turkey itself. Mustafa Kemal had banned religious dress. "The main result", as Hebblethwaite notes, "was to provide posterity with memorable photographs of Archbishop Roncalli in bowler hat and sober suit, looking for all the world like a Lombardy businessman who found it difficult to cut down on the *pasta*". As he himself noted: "What does it matter whether we wear the soutane or trousers so long as we proclaim the word of God". But his historical imagination was quickened by living in such daily proximity to Byzantium, Chalcedon, Ephesus, and all the other countless monuments to early Christianity. Peter Hebblethwaite sums it up as follows: "Living in Turkey gave him a sense of Christian origins and a knowledge of the Oriental tradition. He was delivered from the narrowness of Roman theology".

By 1940 Istanbul had become a centre of international diplomatic intrigue and intelligence gathering. Roncalli suddenly became an ear for Hitler's 'sincere and good Catholic' representative, Count von Papen, who used him to convey a beautiful vision of the 'New Order' to the Vatican—an innocent and gullible ear, so the Vatican thought: Mgr Tardini minuted one of his reports: "Questo a capito niente" ('This fellow has understood nothing'). In 1941, with a visa from von Papen and by German military transport, Roncalli went to Athens.

Once again he had three years closely involved with people devastated by war. He lobbied for international aid for the defeated and hungry Greeks. He did what he could for British prisoners of war and the German wounded. He was pleased by how decent the Italian troops were—many from Bergamo. He was increasingly involved with the Red Cross and the Red Crescent. He devoted a great deal of time and energy in trying to save the Jews. He received a remarkable testimonial from Isaac Herzog, the Grand Rabbi of Jerusalem, in 1944: “The people of Israel will never forget the help brought to its unfortunate brothers and sisters by the Holy See and its highest representatives at this saddest moment in our history”. But, six months later, he signed a dreadful letter to the U.S. War Refugee Board saying that he would not be making “any further representations on behalf of the Jewish people in Hungary”—“the only means of doing so is through the Papal Secretariat of State”. The letter is in English and he could not have written it himself. From the point of view of Tardini and others in Rome it apparently seemed that the apostolic delegation in Istanbul had been too independent.

On December 6, 1944, Roncalli received a telegram from Tardini instructing him to take up the post of papal nuncio in Paris by the end of the month—“I was astonished and dismayed”. He was not the Vatican’s first choice: the nuncio in Argentina declined the job ‘on health grounds’. Tardini made it plain that he was not *his* choice. Pius XII thought of him for the job. The Vatican had evidently concluded that, although Roncalli was not cut out for a secret agent, he could live with extremely complex and tense relations between ecclesiastical and civil/military authorities. For that was the problem in Paris. De Gaulle saw Pius XII on June 30, 1944, and demanded the dismissal of the nuncio: “the bearded, ascetic and uncommunicative Mgr Valerio Valeri”, on the grounds that he was identified with Vichy France. The pope refused. On August 26, de Gaulle led his troops into Notre Dame cathedral to thank God for the liberation of Paris—but the archbishop, Cardinal Suhard, was under arrest in his palace, suspected of ‘collaboration’. The French bishops had indeed preached submission to Vichy. The Interior Ministry already had a list of twenty five whom they wanted removed (including Suhard)—and another list of six bishops who would make worthy archbishops, and twenty two priests who would make good bishops. There certainly was a massive Church-State problem: the old hands in the Vatican must have been reminded of Napoleon.

Then the comedy starts. Valeri had to leave, but Pius XII continued to refuse to appoint a successor. By November, therefore, the Vatican had still not recognized the new French government. The Russians had their ambassador installed. The tradition is that the papal nuncio, as dean of the diplomatic corps, presents the New Year

greetings to the head of state. In the absence of a nuncio, this significant task falls to the most senior diplomat in town—and that just happened to be the Russian ambassador. That is why Roncalli had less than three weeks to pack and do the round of farewells in Turkey. He left Ankara on December 27, taking a series of short-haul flights via Beirut, Lydda, Cairo, Benghazi, Naples, and finally Rome on the afternoon of the 28th. He had meetings with Tardini and Montini later that day—no doubt briefing him on the difficult situation in Paris. Next day he met Pius XII, and then the ousted Valeri, who gave him his draft of the New Year speech (and for whom he retained great affection—he voted for him in the papal conclave in 1959), before lunching at the Palazzo Taverno with de Gaulle's personal envoy to the Holy See. On the 30th the French flew him to Paris and he presented his respects to Georges Bidault at the Quai d'Orsay that evening. The following day was a Sunday: he met Suhard in the evening. First thing in the morning he presented his credentials to de Gaulle, at the Elysée, and was thus, by eleven o'clock, dean of the diplomatic corps, with Bogomilov on his right. He apologised to him, and arranged that his first diplomatic call would be at the Russian embassy next day. He then delivered Valeri's speech, ungrudgingly recognising de Gaulle's provisional government and thus, codedly, disowning Vichy. Much to his surprise, considering how aloof they had always been while he was there, the Turkish ambassador had been telling the others what a splendid fellow Roncalli was.

The first problem was that de Gaulle wanted to appoint Maritain as ambassador to the Holy See—but he had toured Latin America a few months previously lecturing about 'human rights' and the nuncios in Chile and Argentina had sent unfavourable reports to the Vatican. Tardini made it plain that "the Holy See would have preferred someone not involved in public party political controversies", and Maritain's arrival was presented as a 'concession' to the French. The question of the 'collaborationist' bishops was then negotiated by de Gaulle and Bidault, through Maritain, directly with the Holy See—in effect, with Tardini. In the end seven prelates were retired, with pension rights in their former dioceses, of whom two were in colonial France and none was a cardinal. But it does not seem that Roncalli played an important role in this reconciliation between Church and State in France. In fact, it is hard to see that he did anything interesting or creative during his years in Paris. He pottered about, amiably, becoming a well-known 'character'. He concerned himself with the interior decoration of the nunciature (including papal coats of arms designed by Mgr Bruno Heim). Given that these immediately post-war years in French Catholicism were immensely exciting, and a principal seed-bed for many things that flowered in the Council, it is

quite extraordinary to see how Roncalli bumbled obliviously through everything. He was, quite properly, concerned, as papal nuncio, not to become involved pastorally as he had in Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece, where there were no other Catholic bishops to speak of. He was content to be a post-box. He seems hardly to have known what the priest-worker debate was about. He was in his late sixties—he was seventy in 1951. The truth is surely that he was deeply tired—he had no real chance to recover from his exertions during the War. He clearly also found Paris a vastly more alien environment than Istanbul. He kept up his reading of history, and continued his scholarly work on Borromeo, but he simply had no interest whatsoever in French culture or literature or theology. In 1949, when the Holy Office issued a decree on Bastille Day, excommunicating Catholics who collaborated with communists, he set off for a long tour of the provinces, leaving others to explain what Rome meant, and did not mean, to the priest-workers and many other concerned Catholics in Paris. In 1950, when Pius XII issued the encyclical *Humani Generis*, which set off the great purge of the theologians in France without whose work Vatican II would have been inconceivable, Roncalli went off for two months of holiday in Italy. There is a gap in his personal memoirs between July and December 1950. What he thought about the wave of repression that included the dismissal of such theologians as de Lubac, Bouillard, Rondet, Chenu, Congar, and others less famous, remains a mystery. If unpublished sources become available fresh light may be cast on this matter—but, as noted already, it seems perfectly possible that they would only confirm that he never thought about it at all. Amazing as it may seem, the future Pope of Vatican II owed nothing to his eight years in Paris: his mind had been decisively shaped by Bergamo, Bulgaria and Turkey.

His release from exile in Paris was as unexpected as his departure from Constantinople. Almost eight years to the day he received a letter from Montini, asking him if he would be prepared to succeed the Patriarch of Venice, who was on his deathbed. He was now past seventy, but it would be like going home—and at last he would have a diocese in his own country. His diaries record that he prayed for the recovery of the dying man—but he prayed also that he would succeed him. A month later he knew that he was to be Patriarch of Venice and that he would be made a Cardinal on January 12, 1953.

He held a farewell dinner attended by all eight of the men who had been prime minister during his stay. On February 23, 1953, he left France—“partenza definitiva”, as he noted in his diary. The next day he was at the bedside of his beloved sister Ancilla, who was slowly dying of cancer of the stomach. He took possession of Venice, well aware that it united Bergamo with the Levant, and loving every

minute of the grand entry on a gondola (abolished by his successor, the future Pope John Paul I). There can be no doubt that, as every page of Peter Hebblethwaite's chapter on this period shows, Roncalli was completely rejuvenated. He walked serenely through Italian politics. Church/State relations were child's play to him by now, and great fun on his home ground. He had someone he trusted in the Vatican: Montini. They exchanged letters frequently. He loved every minute of the job, and made friendships wherever he went.

In a letter to the family, dated March 3, 1954, after mentioning his own good health (something that he was to do increasingly), he referred for the first time to 'the health of the Holy Father'. Pius XII was dying for the next four years. Injections of finely ground tissues taken from freshly slaughtered lambs were to keep him going. The Vatican was not run by his housekeeper-nun, as some say, but by a 'pentagon' of cardinals, including Ottaviani, who were powerful enough to have Montini 'promoted' to become Archbishop of Milan at the end of 1954—but with no prospect of becoming a cardinal—which ruled *him*, a well-known lover of French theology, right out of becoming pope. Roncalli was shocked. His reaction was to invite Montini to preach in Venice, which he was unable to do, but this was one of Roncalli's ways of rewarding his friends: the previous year he had invited Cardinal Spellman of New York who, when he worked in Rome in the 1930s, had kept Roncalli supplied with Mass stipends.

The diocesan Synod in 1957, which he regarded as an event in the reforming tradition of the Council of Trent and of St. Charles Borromeo, was the culmination of his years in Venice. A passage in one of his addresses, dated November 25, 1957, is worth quoting in extenso: "*Authoritarianism* stifles life and leads to a rigid, external discipline and to complicated, harmful over-organization. It represses legitimate initiatives, is unable to listen, confuses harshness with firmness, inflexibility with dignity. *Paternalism* is also a caricature of paternity. It keeps people immature in order to maintain its own superior position, behaves liberally towards some, but fails to respect the rights of its subordinates. It speaks protectively, and does not accept true collaboration". In 1957 that should have sounded remarkably like a criticism of Pius XII—or even of Pius X; but nothing seems to have been further from Roncalli's mind. On the contrary, his references to Pius X, amazingly canonised in 1954, become increasingly reverential—but, as his predecessor as Patriarch of Venice, the revered shadow also directed his mind to the possibility that he too might become pope.

In the end there were only fifty one cardinals at the conclave in 1958, and half of them were as old or older than Roncalli—who was by then seventy six. There can be little doubt, despite the pious

ambiguities which Peter Hebblethwaite quotes from his diaries, he knew well enough that he was a serious candidate. He enjoyed going as papal legate to Lebanon in 1954, where he met the Melkite patriarch, Maximos IV, who was to play an important role at the Council, as well as the Maronite patriarch, then aged ninety two. Once again he records his own relative youthfulness and good health—for one thing, in his cabin on the ship, he was fit enough to listen to Pius XII's radio message to the National Marian Congress in Beirut *on his knees*.

On October 12, 1958, Roncalli arrived in Rome for the obsequies of Pope Pius XII. Like many other people he was disgusted by the exhibition of the decaying body, so incompetently embalmed by the pope's personal physician (an oculist), who was selling photographs and describing his methods to a press conference within days. It certainly seemed symbolic of the end of a great pontificate that lasted too long. Fresh air was what the Vatican required. The Pacelli nephews had been so prominent in recent years, although of course never on the Borgia scale of papal nepotism. It is surely very significant that, in the days between the funeral and the conclave, Roncalli solemnly forbade his own flighty priest-nephew to come anywhere near Rome. If he had not thought that he was a serious candidate he would not have bothered. If he had not thought he could do the job he would surely have invited his nephew to flaunt himself.

The leading contenders were apparently Lercaro, Ruffini and Ottaviani, closely followed by Masella, our friend Valeri, and Roncalli himself. The conclave opened on October 25th. Ten days before that, as his diary records, he was being sounded out. Ironically enough, it seems to have been Ottaviani who began to run him as a 'transitional pope'. But, as Peter Hebblethwaite seems to establish, Roncalli did a good deal to bring about his own election. He cultivated Tardini, with whom any pope would have to work, by lunching with him and then visiting his pet orphanage of working-class boys. He made it clear—for instance to Andreotti, the politician—that he did not think that Agagianian, the favoured 'non-Italian' candidate, would be any good: he understood 'the East' less well than Roncalli himself did, so the latter (rightly) said. As Hebblethwaite says, "he was assiduous in meeting all the right people". On the evening before the conclave he surely knew what was going to happen, and he was not trembling. The 'job description' in the speech *De eligendo pontifice* delivered by Cardinal Bacci, who is better known for having spent his life thinking of Latin words for helicopter, washing machine, etc., might have been a portrait of Pope John XXIII.

It seems to have taken eleven ballots. In the end he got thirty eight votes. He and Agagianian, with twenty and eighteen respectively, seem to have been the strongest candidates from the beginning.

Tisserant, seeing that Agagianian was not going to make it, fell back on Masella: "He thought Roncalli didn't know enough to become pope". Ottaviani, apparently, rallied Masella's votes to Roncalli. He lunched alone with Capovilla, his secretary, before the final ballot, had a siesta, and drafted his acceptance speech. We have the entry in his diary for the day 'I became Pope'—"eccomi eletto papa". The larger of the two white cassocks that the pontifical tailor had in readiness failed to meet round the front, but he knew that he wanted to be called John—"Vocabor Joannes". He was thinking of Avignon, the Baptist, and the Apostle of love. He was nearly seventy-nine, and (according to *Time*) he weighed 205 lbs. One might have thought that he weighed rather more.

Apparently one knelt when being interviewed by Pius XII. Pope John surprised Tardini by inviting him to sit down. (The nonsense that surrounded the pope in even quite recent times makes the mind boggle; even now how often has there been a woman at the table when the present pope has a meal?) Tardini, the most powerful man in the Vatican, had long regarded John as an ass. He resisted John's will to make him Secretary of State—"I told the Holy Father that I wouldn't serve under him, because new policies would need new people"; but finally he gave way. John's first act was to show the Curia that he would work with them. He had himself enthroned on the feast of St. Charles Borromeo. Weeks later, he created a string of new cardinals, with Montini at the head of the list. He talked to the press as if he was a human being and not the oracle at Delphi. At Christmas he went visiting hospitals and the prison. And from the very beginning he had the idea of convoking a Council.

One of the most valuable chapters in Hebblethwaite's book is his analysis of how the Council came about. Ottaviani and Ruffini had been associated with the project in 1948 of holding a Council, to condemn modern errors (Marxism especially) and perhaps to proclaim a new Marian dogma. Pius XII toyed with the idea and then shelved it. Two days after his election, according to Capovilla, John spoke of 'the necessity of holding a council'. It was on January 25, 1959, at the end of the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity which he had celebrated ever since his days in Constantinople, that he broke the news to seventeen of the cardinals, assembled, significantly, in the basilica of St Paul's outside the Walls. They stayed poker-faced, or, as he said himself, "there was a devout and impressive silence". But for the preceding four months he had been trying the idea out on a variety of people. He also had studied the material prepared in 1948. It must have shown him what sort of Council he did *not* want; it is doubtful if he ever became clear about the sort of Council he *did* want.

The first move was to consult the bishops, Catholic universities, and suchlike. The responses have been published by the Vatican Press

in fifteen massive volumes. He can have received very little guidance from this mass of material (which deserves close study as a mirror of the collective episcopal mind in 1959). He then decreed that the preparatory work should begin, under the supervision of the Curia. Everything seemed to be moving towards the sort of Council that Ottaviani wanted: he was, after all, one of the most powerful men in the Vatican by now. Even at this stage, it seems that John still did not have any clear idea of what he wanted, or even of how laborious the machinery would have to be.

Peter Hebblethwaite is surely correct when he lists three events that decisively changed the course of the forthcoming Council. Archbishop Jaeger of Paderborn published a small book arguing that it would have to be different from Vatican I. Secondly, Hans Küng brought out a somewhat larger book in 1960, written in a vastly more lively style, setting out what became in effect the real agenda of the Council. Like it or not, in historical perspective, that book did more than anything to set the Council on course. Thirdly, coming from Jaeger's ideas, a small group was created to deal exclusively with ecumenical questions—and Augustin Bea, Rector of the *Biblicum*, formerly confessor to Pius XII, older even than John himself, a German Jesuit who had worked in Rome since 1924, received the job of leading it. He is clearly the second hero of Peter Hebblethwaite's book. It is not made clear why Bea was chosen or who found him—Jaeger perhaps? But that now meant that the dynamic that sustained the Council had been found: it was to be Ottaviani's world-defying Church versus Bea's openness to the 'separated brethren'.

The rest, as they say is history. Well, not quite. It was established that the 'observers' would be present, but far from clear how much they would be allowed to see. Under the guidance of the Curia the texts had been drafted for the bishops to sign—and the notes that John made on his set of papers never show the least sign of dissatisfaction. The documents that had the bishops of France, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, all gnashing their teeth, at least under the tutelage of their theological advisers (Edward Schillebeeckx, Karl Rahner, and suchlike), seemed perfectly acceptable to John.

But by this time some of the leading bishops were venturing to think aloud in their pastoral letters. Suenens of Malines and Montini of Milan published letters which impressed John immensely. In fact, Montini's pastoral, *Pensiamo al Concilio*, written from Rome, is the first clear statement of Pope John's mind—"We shall have a Council of positive rather than punitive reforms, and of exhortation rather than anathemas". This, and his later interventions, suggests that, in spite of Hebblethwaite's title, Montini was to be the real 'Pope of the Council'—as John himself surely soon came to realise. Knowing his

age he had to combat those in the Curia and elsewhere who counselled delay and longer preparation. He still thought that the Council might conclude its business before Christmas when at last he had the opening fixed for October 11, 1962.

A great deal now depended on his opening address. On September 23 he received the medical reports which, although they have not been published, must have told him that his gastric pains were the cancer of the stomach that had killed his sister Maria as well as Ancilla. He knew what they had suffered. He must have known that he had six months to a year left. In fact he had nine months. The version of the address published in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* is interestingly different from the transcript of what he actually said, to be found in Vatican Radio archives. It is, in any case, doubtful if, after hours of liturgy, his audience would have been capable of understanding it if they had had ears. But it was frequently quoted in the event, and certainly marked the deliberations of the Council. But once again it was Montini's programme for the Council as outlined in a letter addressed on October 18 to Cicognani (who had succeeded Tardini), but no doubt meant for John himself, that showed that he had understood, and that there would have to be at least three sessions, and that there was someone who would see the Council through.

There is so much else in this treasury of a book. The majority of the bishops rejected the Curial prepared texts. John got involved with Khrushchev and the Cuban missile crisis. He brought out the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*—it was published on Maundy Thursday 1963. But by this time the cancer had almost destroyed him. In appalling pain, for all the sedation, and with the world media concentrated upon his bedroom, he finally died just as the *Ite Missa Est* came over the loudspeakers at the evening Mass 'pro infirmo' that was being held in St. Peter's Square down below.

It would be a hard man who could finish this book without being deeply moved. It is not only the definitive life of a great and good man. It does not only remind us, when we have begun to forget or to allow ourselves to listen to simplified versions, of exactly what the recent history of the Catholic Church has been. Without ever displaying it, Peter Hebblethwaite has inscribed a whole *theology* in this biography, which should nourish reflection for many years to come.

1 Peter Hebblethwaite, *John XIII : Pope of the Council*, Geoffrey Chapman, 1984, London. Pp. 550. £14.95.