

The Pope is Dead. Long Live the Pope/Viva John XXIII

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, November 1958, 1, 2.

Summary: Culling newspaper accounts of the newly elected Pope, John XXIII, she describes him as a man who loves the soil and family. Includes quotes from his first public address on love of the poor and condemnation of preparing for war. Explains what it means to struggle for justice and to do so “even if by force,” a phrase the Pope used. (DDLW #747).

“Miserere mei, Deus, secundum miserecordiam Tuam.” [Have pity on me, Lord, according to Thy mercy.]

These words which, aware that I was unworthy and unequal of them, I pronounced at the moment in which with trepidation I accepted election as Supreme Pontiff, I now repeat with even more foundation at a time in which knowledge of the deficiencies, of the failures, of the sins committed during so long a pontificate and in so grave an epoch has made more clear to my mind my insufficiency and unworthiness.

I humbly ask pardon of all whom I may have offended, harmed or scandalized by word or by deed.

I pray those whose affair it is not to bother to erect any monuments to my memory: sufficient it is that my poor mortal remains should be laid simply in a sacred place, the more obscure the better.

I do not need to ask for prayers for my soul. I know how many are those the custom of the Apostolic See and the piety of the faithful causes to be offered for every Pope who dies.

Nor do I need to leave a “spiritual testament,” as so many zealous prelates are in praiseworthy fashion used to do; because the not inconsiderable number of acts and speeches emanated or pronounced by me by reason of my office suffice to make known, to whoever should be chance desire to know my thought on the different religious and moral questions.

Therefore, I name as my universal heir the Holy Apostolic See from which I have had so much, as from a most loving mother. (Last Will and Testament of Pope Pius XII).

There is no time with God. We have lost a Pope and we have another Pope, and yet that is not the way to say it at all. We have not lost a Pope. The life of Pius XII, our dear Holy Father, “is changed, not taken away. And the abode of this earthly sojourn being dissolved, an eternal dwelling is repaired in heaven.” No more moving around for him, no more uncertainties, responsibilities, no more exhausting labors. I’m sure the present Holy

Father, John XXIII, in spite of his robust appearance must sigh with envy when he has time to stop and think. No, we have not lost a Pope. Our life has been enriched and made more interesting by the accession of another Pope. It was good to see the breathless interest of people all over the world, as they waited the news on the radio. It was good to see the giant headlines in the paper. The death of one Pope, the accession of another, is of tremendous importance in the lives of people. Catholic or non-Catholic.

What kind of a man is he going to be, this new Pope. What kind of man has he been, this former Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, who is now 77 years old, and who remarked when he took the name of John that all the other Popes by that name had had short reigns – all but John the Beloved Apostle who rested on the breast of Christ at the last supper, and who lived to so great an age, that the only sermon he could preach at the close of his life was, “My little children, love one another.” The other John whom our new Holy Father was commemorating was John the Baptist, who died a martyr, whose head was chopped off because he would not cease from criticizing the morality of the ruler of Galilee. Our own Ammon Hennacy is John the Baptist Hennacy, and his greatest veneration is for those martyrs who have shed their blood for love of God and their fellows.

“Son of a farmer,” all the newspapers told us in their headlines – son of a tenant farmer, one paper proclaimed. But according to the Times, his family had small holdings, and they were probably very small indeed since there were thirteen children – one paper said nine. There are still five living, and many nieces and nephews, and one picture of his brother appeared in the Times, with a burlap sack about his shoulders, to protect them from the straps fastening a great basket of corn, harvesting a summer of hard labor.

The name of the village of 1,200 or so means “under the Mountain,” and is in the shadow of the Alps. The new Pope spent last August there, as he has all his vacations. So in addition to love of the soil, there is also love of family.

A man born to the soil will always be close to the soil, close to reality. Dust we are, and to dust we shall return. The food we eat, the chair we sit on, the desk we write at, the bed we sleep on, all come in a way from the soil. The leather of our shoes, the wool of our coats come from the animals who live from the soil. And all the violence and anguish and lust of the times comes from the fact that the great majority of men do not use this creativity, their God given powers, which make us like to God, to take this earth as God did, and fashion it into what we need to use to sustain and enrich our lives so that we can praise God fully, and be transformed by that praise and love so that some day we shall be like Him and love Him forever in Heaven.

Other things we noted in the press. In the story of his life as Cardinal of Venice, he extended hospitality to his “enemies” when the Marxist party was holding convention in Venice. Also in crying out in his first public address for peace in the world, he cried out for the poor.

For the Poor

“We pray to God for all brothers of Christ,” he said, “but especially for the poor and the suffering, and we ask Him that He grant to all in abundance necessary help and heavenly

consolation.” He prayed for the countries which do not have religious freedom, and for the suffering clergy of those countries; he prayed for the Eastern Church which shares our dogma if not our pontiff. And then he goes on to say,

“Why should the resources of human genius and the riches of the people turn more often to preparing arms – pernicious instruments of death and destruction – than to increasing the welfare of all classes of citizens and particularly of the poor?

“We know, it is true, that in bringing about so laudable, so praiseworthy a proposition and to level the differences there are grave and intricate difficulties in the way, but they must be victoriously overcome, even if by force; this is in fact the most important undertaking mostly connected with the prosperity of all mankind. Put yourselves to the task therefore, with confident courage, under the reflection of the light that comes from on high, and with divine assistance, turn your gaze to the people who are entrusted to you and listen to their voice.

“What do they ask you? What do they beseech from you? They do not ask those monstrous means of war, discovered in our time, which can cause fraternal massacre and universal slaughter – but peace, that peace in virtue in which the human family can live freely, flourish and prosper. . . .”

Use of Force

Already we are receiving letters asking us what the Holy Father means by such a phrase, “even if by force.” I find no difficulty in understanding it. Heaven must be taken by violence, and working for a better order here in this world means a terrible struggle. We need all the strength of body and soul and mind too. To live in poverty ourselves, to share the misery, the homelessness, the uncertainty and the precarity of others; to make our protest against the evils of the day, the injustice – to speak out strongly, fearlessly, risking job and home for oneself and for family; enduring the scorn of the world, and often too, of those one loves.

No explanation we make will satisfy the captious critic, we know that. Elizabeth Rogers and I were talking about that ambiguous phrase which will undoubtedly cause much discussion among pacifists and the opponents of pacifism, and she suggested that such a statement of the Holy Father might have found its source in an incident which happened some years ago in the reign of Pius XII. In a certain poor district, the peasants led by the priests, went to fields which did not belong to them and took possession of them, cultivating them in order to ward off the famine that threatened. Certainly that expropriation was “the use of force.” Taking by sheer desperation, and willingness to die, if necessary, the means of livelihood.

Our stand against the Civil Defense Authorities with their war games, was our own use of force against them. We opposed their compulsion with a spiritual force of our own by our imprisonment. Ammon’s fasting is doing violence to himself in penance for our country having dropped the atom bomb on Japan. Yes, we must set ourselves with all the force we possess, against war, and the making of instruments of war, and our means are prayer and fasting, and the non-payment of federal income tax which goes for war. We pray the Holy Father has a long life, and a forceful one.