

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Spiritual Notes of a Pope: Journal of a Soul

Review Author: Jose S. Arcilla

Philippine Studies vol. 13, no. 3 (1965): 747–749

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

ciliar Movement to subject the Popes to the Councils once more doomed the efforts to reform the Church, because it was a denial of her divine constitution. But with the decline of the Conciliar Movement, the worldly and corrupt Renaissance Popes showed themselves even more incapable of reform, and dragged the Church down to further depths of degradation, finally laying her open to the tragic destruction of Christian unity consummated in the Protestant Reformation. Only then were the forces of reform coming from the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church, able to achieve anything lasting, this time by Popes and Council together at Trent.

Certainly, as McNally points out, the situation of the Church today is not that of the late Middle Ages. But she is faced with the ever-recurring problem, so well illustrated in the history here traced, of "the cultural adjustment of the Church to the new civilization which is being born, and her effective integration into contemporary life." The inability of Popes, theologians, and Councils to understand the new issues of that age of transition from the medieval to the modern world, and their readiness to condemn or ignore erroneous solutions rather than examine the truth contained in errors, brought disaster on the Church then, as the history traced here makes clear. No less today, in what may prove to be an even greater transition from what was known as the Modern Age to a new age, is it necessary for Christians to understand the problems of their own time, and to appreciate and make use of what is valid in the criticism directed against the Church of today. The Church and her message are perennial, guaranteed by her Divine Founder. But it is up to the Christians of each age to make that message relevant for their contemporaries. If they do not, the Church will not cease to exist, but she will fail to achieve God's purposes for her and for men in that age.

JOHN N. SCHUMACHER, S.J.

SPIRITUAL NOTES OF A POPE

JOURNAL OF A SOUL. By Pope John XXIII. Translated by Dorothy White. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965. lvii, 453 pp.

The welcome given to the *Journal of a Soul* by Pope John XXIII is best seen in the fact that the second edition was issued just a month after the first had been out, while, at the same time, a third, plus translations into other languages, was being readied. The first part of the book includes an introduction by Mgr. Loris Capovilla, the late pope's secretary, and a "meditation" by Fr. Giulio Bevilacqua, two brief essays that prepare the reader for what superficially might

be disappointing reading. These are followed by an interesting bibliographical digression and a chronology of the pope's life. The body of the book consists of hitherto unpublished spiritual notes which Pope John had written from the earliest days of his seminary training at Bergamo to a few months before his death. Then follow four letters, a "Spiritual Testament" and several brief writings. An appendix, including among others, a special set of rules he had imposed on himself as a young seminarian, closes the book. An interesting document is the pope's tribute to the memory of Father Francesco Pitocchi, whom he regards "providence had sent . . . at the right moment" (p. 431).

The chief interest in the book is naturally the *Journal* itself (pp. 4-326) which is almost exclusively spiritual notes accumulated through the retreats he made annually. For the first time a whole book of intimate glimpses into the soul of a man who became pope is open to the public, disclosing the deepest personal thoughts—and, hence, the most human picture—of the Vicar of Christ on earth. From the most banal of resolutions ("I must get up at half past five . . ." — p. 177) to the more elevated of the pope's experiences ("I felt . . . a burning desire to give myself wholly, energetically, to the search for true holiness . . ."—p. 147), one can trace a life-long program of asceticism unsuspected by those who knew only the simple charm of his external ways in the Vatican. Severe in his habit of self-examination, Pope John never relaxed his boyhood resolve to rid himself of all his faults in order "to love God at all costs" (p. xvii), a freedom finally achieved when he was elevated to the papal throne: "Since the Lord chose me . . . I feel I no longer have special ties in this life . . ." (p. 298).

He was a good boy, he recalls, unsophisticated by the rural spirituality of his home when he entered the seminary at Bergamo. The notes of this early period show a concern over the *minutiae* of the spiritual life, usual in an exemplary student for the priesthood. What is unusual is that care did not degenerate into a formalistic compliance with "rules of perfection"; on the contrary, they facilitated his progress towards a truly holy life, uncomplicated because simplified in his one consuming desire for "union with Christ, with the Church and with the heaven which awaits me" (p. 361).

What were the influences that aided this spiritual growth? His first retreats as a young seminarian were made according to the Ignatian tradition, or, more exactly, the spirit of the first week of the Ignatian exercises, which asks the retreatant to take a bold look at God, the Creator and End of all things. This remained a basic insight throughout the pope's life and gave it its unaffected evangelical

tone, and which explains to a great extent his success both as a diplomat for the Holy See and later on as the visible head of the Roman Catholic Church (p. 308).

This attitude might easily have changed, but for the guidance and inspiration of the Redemptorist Fr. Pitocchi, confessor of the Roman Seminary, and spiritual counsellor of the young Angelo Roncalli in 1902-05. Fresh from his military service, the future pope needed a steadying influence to lead him on as he resumed his ecclesiastical career after the harsh and often shocking (to the young seminarian) realities of barracks life. Fr. Pitocchi gave him a brief motto to remember ("God is all; I am nothing." p. 431), but these were six key words that "opened to my gaze new horizons, unexplored, full of mystery and spiritual beauty." From then on, he saw that "the life of the spirit is more than just a succession of acts, the natural result of a good character and of a very Christian education strengthened by the Lord's grace; it is rather the gradual formation of habits of thought and action, in the light of higher principles revealed to the soul gradually; it is a life that has to be studied and practiced..." (pp. 431-32).

The *Journal of A Soul* is the record of this practice. It is the record of the successful efforts of a man to "form habits of thought and action" in order to be a fit instrument in the service of God's kingdom. It is also a commentary on how God prepared a man for "a ministry which towers far above the loftiest human dignity." (p. 303). In the style that the pope knows best, it is a treatise on the spiritual life, particularly valuable because it shows that the traditional Christian virtues of humility, poverty, sacrifice, charity have not lost their meaning.

The various prayers at the end of the book are a precious addition, placing before the reader's eyes the simplicity of the pope who had "nothing to hide" because he was filled with love for God and for his fellow-men.

The *Journal* does not have the lyricism of the classical mystical writings of the great Saints. The style may even impress the casual reader as too self-conscious. But it is this prosaic simplicity of the pope's diary which betrays the candor and humility of one of the great popes of modern times.

This is a big book (more than 450 pages) but this splendid edition might just prove above the means of the ordinary reader in the Philippines. One hopes a cheaper edition will make it available to a wider reading public.

JOSE S. ARCILLA, S.J.