

new oxford review

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THE “JOHANNINE TURN” WAS CARRIED OUT BY OTHERS

BENIAMINO DI MARTINO

POPE JOHN XXIII THROUGH THE TESTIMONY OF SILVIO CARDINAL ODDI

TRANSLATED BY N. MICHAEL BRENNEN

Popes John Paul II and John XXIII were canonized on April 27, 2014, the Feast of Divine Mercy (a feast created by Pope Wojtyla during the Jubilee Year 2000). On that same feast day, on May 1, 2011, John Paul II had been beatified, six years after his death. The beatification of John XXIII had already happened a few years previously, on September 3, 2000, when John Paul II simultaneously elevated him and Pius XI to the “honor of the altars.”

Pope Francis’s decision to preside over a single

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ceremony for John Paul II and John XXIII came as no surprise. He had expressed this preference while talking to journalists during the return flight from the 2013 World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro. A Mexican journalist asked the Pope what model of holiness emerges from these two great figures. After illustrating some of the characteristics of the spirituality of the two popes, Francis concluded, “I believe holding the canonization ceremony of both popes together is a message for the Church.”

What might this message be? Italian journalist Antonio Socci interpreted the simultaneous canonization as “a decision that gives a sign of unity and that finally takes the Church beyond old controversies concerning the [Second Vatican] Council that characterized the second half of the twentieth century.” In other words, the simultaneous proclamation of the two saints would emphasize magisterial continuity and help set aside interpretations that in the past few decades have contrasted not only a post-conciliar Church to a pre-conciliar Church but also John XXIII to the popes who preceded him, and that have pitted “Wojtyla the Restorer” against “the Good Pope John.”

The commitment of some scholars to reconstruct the figure of John XXIII in order to purify his image and avoid any sort of “mythologizing” that could be used to consolidate

biased interpretations and ideological ploys is certainly not without historical significance; several recent studies have contributed to this end. Though in a more modest and less articulated form, a further contribution can come from a witness to the times of John XXIII and the Council in the person of Silvio Cardinal Oddi. In light of the canonization of Pope Roncalli, the contrarian opinions expressed by Cardinal Oddi about the personality and tendencies of John XXIII are again of current interest. The event prompted me to dust off the notes of an interview that Cardinal Oddi granted me — in the form of a long conversation — in the now distant time of November 1991.

Silvio Angelo Pio Oddi was born in 1910 in a small village in the Italian province of Piacenza. The twelfth of fourteen children, he was born into a large and pious family. Oddi was accepted into seminary at an early age, and was ordained a priest at the age of 21. After completing a degree in canon law in Rome, he entered the diplomatic service and was soon sent to the Middle East (Iran, Lebanon, and Istanbul), Paris, and Belgrade. As a young diplomatic attaché in the Paris nunciature, he was held in high esteem by Msgr. Roncalli, who treated him as a close collaborator. Elevated to the episcopacy in 1953, Oddi was appointed apostolic delegate to Jerusalem, then nuncio in Egypt, Belgium, and Luxembourg. He also carried out delicate assignments in a few communist countries. He was appointed a cardinal in 1969 by Pope Paul VI; from 1979 to 1985 he was prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy. Cardinal Oddi was one of the personalities who stood out in the ecclesiastical panorama of the 1980s. He strenuously defended his views and was frequently accused of being outright belligerent. A target of those who saw themselves as progressivists, and of some of the Catholic press as well, he enjoyed the trust of Pope Wojtyła.

In that 1991 interview with Cardinal Oddi, I heard firsthand from a principal actor a highly qualified evaluation of the life of the universal Church in those years, and I got an overview of a few hot-button issues in Catholicism in the preceding decades. I now want to extract a few parts that offer a priceless witness to Angelo Roncalli. In fact, Cardinal Oddi can be considered among those who knew John XXIII best, and among those with whom the Pope maintained a close and confidential

friendship.



Your Eminence, one of the relationships that has most influenced your life was the one with Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli.

“Yes. That relationship originated in rather adventurous circumstances.... I had been opposed by the Italian consulate in Beirut — I was working in the nunciature there — and Msgr. Montini [assistant secretary of state at the time, and later Pope Paul VI — *Ed.*] had recalled me to Rome to tell me that I would have to transfer to Cairo. I could not reach my new destination, the apostolic delegation in Egypt and Palestine, by sea because the Mediterranean was impassable, which necessitated a long journey through Hungary and the Balkans. However, I found the border between Turkey and Syria closed, and while waiting for it to re-open I was a guest in the residence of the apostolic delegate to Istanbul, Msgr. Roncalli. It was there in 1941, during a forty-day wait to resume my journey, that our friendship began.”

A friendship destined to solidify when you were assigned to the nunciature in Paris.

“Msgr. Roncalli became the nuncio in France in 1944.... We spent three years together in Paris — precisely from September 1946 to June 1949 — and I worked with him as an auditor and counselor in the nunciature. Msgr. Roncalli remained in France until 1953, when he was sent to the patriarchal seat in Venice, while I had already been transferred to the highly sensitive nunciature in Belgrade in 1949.”

In Paris what were the general impressions of Europe and the Church? French Catholicism at the time anticipated in many ways the proposals for reform that spread a decade later.

“I must say that the nuncio gave little attention to that great turmoil. Teilhard de Chardin had long been ignored, and that was accounted as unjustified carelessness on the part of Msgr. Roncalli.”

By whom?

“Directly from the Pope. I believe Pius XII reprimanded Msgr. Roncalli. Roncalli did not like Teilhard de Chardin’s ideas, but he did not give

them much weight. Roncalli asked jokingly why de Chardin was not content instead to keep himself busy by teaching the catechism. But Msgr. Roncalli really was little inclined to inquire and investigate.”

There were, however, other recalls by the Pope.

“Yes, that is true. Pius XII did not like Msgr. Roncalli’s habit of traveling frequently. The Pope would have preferred that the nuncio dedicate himself more strictly to diplomatic work and taking care of his institutional functions. The Pope actually came to the point of directing that Msgr. Roncalli should not leave Paris more than four times a year!”

Despite all that, Roncalli’s nomination to the nunciature was a personal decision made by Pius XII.

“The Pope wanted Msgr. Roncalli to occupy the very important diplomatic seat in Paris.”

Thus, as much as Pius XII had wanted Roncalli in Paris, that did not spare the latter from the Pope’s reprimands.

“Pius XII thought highly of Msgr. Roncalli, even if he thought his judgments somewhat superficial.”

A “superficial” representative of Pius XII in a country full of theological turmoil such as France?

“Yes, a theology that was already in a renewal phase.”

An ecclesiological, secular, patristic, liturgical, and biblical renewal: that was the nouvelle théologie that worried Pius XII. And the first signs of dissent were already evident. Those were also the times in which Pius XII evaluated the possibility of convening a Church council.

“Yes, but I was not among those informed. Pius XII held a very limited consultation among the bishops, and I believe Roncalli was made aware of it.”

Pius XII thought inopportune what his successor launched?

“In the end, Pope Pacelli abandoned the idea, fearing an unwanted slippage. He felt old, and he was suspicious of the new theologians.”

A new chapter in the life of Msgr. Roncalli

opened in 1953.

“Roncalli left Paris as a cardinal to be named the patriarch of Venice. He wrote me the day after the announcement: ‘The assignment to Venice came to me in the same form as the one to Paris, and I responded: I accept.’”

In the rigid Pacellian Church, the inaugural telegram that Patriarch Roncalli sent to the Socialist Party convention held in his city raised an uproar.

“True. I know well the displeasure Roncalli felt when he was reprimanded for this gesture. He always loved to show goodness and tolerance. That gesture was intended as a courtesy and a welcome, in the hope that the dialogue might reduce the aversion they felt. He did not consider that these gestures might be exploited as propaganda. I will cite a particular event. As the nuncio in Paris, Msgr. Roncalli was the dean of the diplomatic corps; the Soviet ambassador was the vice-dean. At the time, the diplomats of the Holy See did not speak with the diplomats of the communist countries; we ignored each other; we did not even greet each other. In all the public meetings, Roncalli was in the first place, and the Soviet ambassador was in the second. He always acted lovingly toward the Soviet representative. The communists took advantage of that, circulating photographs depicting these cordial gestures for the purpose of showing that the communist governments received the favor of the Vatican in spite of the hostility of Catholics behind the Iron Curtain. The Holy See intervened more than once to point out just how much evil these photographs were causing. He was good; it was his nature. Others took advantage of that.”

Returning to 1953: This was the year Roncalli became the patriarch of Venice, and you were consecrated a bishop to be sent as the apostolic delegate to Jerusalem.

“I asked him to ordain me a bishop. He had been my superior, and we had always remained in contact. He very willingly agreed to preside over the celebration in the Cathedral of Piacenza.”

What do you think Cardinal Roncalli expected from the 1958 conclave?

“He suspected that the vote would



Pope John XXIII

converge around him. That is clearly evident from a few letters written at that time. It is true that several rounds of voting were necessary, but the tendencies were fairly clear, and the patriarch of Venice was among the favorites.”

What did you expect from the conclave?

“I expected that the choice might fall to Montini, who, though not yet a cardinal, enjoyed very wide favor. When the news of the election reached me — I was in Egypt then — I was surprised by the cardinals’ choice.”

The conclave did not seem to have significant internal divisions between progressives and conservatives, divisions that emerged very shortly afterward.

“In fact it has been maintained — and I have no trouble believing it — that Roncalli was voted in by the cardinals close to Ottaviani [Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani, pro-prefect of the Holy Office and a noted conservative — *Ed.*].”

That would demonstrate that Cardinal Roncalli was considered a conservative.

“Exactly. That is how it was: He was considered a conservative because he was one.”

Then came the announcement of the Council.

“Yes, just a few months after his election, John XXIII announced the convening of the assembly. Tardini was puzzled [Domenico Cardinal Tardini, secretary of state — *Ed.*], as he thought that the Pope’s proposal to bring about the unity of Christians through a Council was naïve. John XXIII gave the impression of believing that an assembly broadened to include representatives of the separated churches would be sufficient to bring ecumenical efforts to fruition. Tardini, who understood the situation well, thought that even the invitation to participate would not have been given serious consideration by many ‘separated brethren.’ So the Council shifted its goals to ‘refreshing’ the Church, though with great confusion in the agenda.”

Your Eminence, you personally participated in the work of the Council. What would you like to remember regarding Vatican II and its documents?

“Primarily one episode that had to do with me. In 1961, before the Council began, I was received by the Pope. The Roman synod had taken place the year before. With a copy of the Acts in hand, I presented myself to John XXIII, who was enthusiastic about how the synod had fulfilled its task. I, however, went to put this in question and to suggest that he strive to avoid the Council coming to the same end. Though faced with the consternation, or perhaps the irritation, of the Pope, I held firm to explain that it was necessary to avoid the Council’s goals remaining unattainable, as had happened with the synod. The synod had prescribed quite rigid rules for the clergy with-

“What will become of me? Will I become a proficient theologian, a great jurist, a rural pastor or a poor, simple priest? But why do I trouble myself about all this? I must become none of these or more than these, however God will have it. God is everything to me. He will make sure that my striving for honor and my desire to look good before others comes to nothing.”

— Pope John XXIII

on the eve of his ordination

out worrying about checking how they were carried out.”

The Roman synod, of which John XXIII was so proud, was an affirmation of traditionalism.

“Absolutely! And Roncalli saw himself fully within it.”

And yet, the image presented of the “Good Pope” is that of a Pope who viewed the changes favorably and who liked to go along with the most progressive proposals.

“I believe I am among those who knew him best. And I can say that John XXIII was a *hardcore* conservative.”

Hardcore?

“In the sense of remaining bound even to the most traditional forms of piety, of the liturgy, and of the praxis of the Church.”

A few examples?

“Just a few years previously, he had reprimanded me for suggesting that the Council should be a council of fathers, not a council of bishops.”

manded me and other young priests for having objected to the opportunity to preserve the apparel of some religious orders, which were frequently as elaborate as they were uncomfortable. He accused us of wanting to destroy the Church! He loved altars full of candles, and he opposed any reduction of the protocol required of cardinals. He recommended the Latin language in his first encyclical, and he continued to wear the oldest hat styles. He was immovable in his use of the cassock.”

What would he have thought of the “Johannine turn” that historiography attributes to him?

“He would never have considered it as such. It happened, but he was not aware of it. Far less did he desire it.”

But the “Johannine turn” happened.

“Yes, but carried out by others, and not desired by him.”

Others?

“Even his closest collaborators. Precisely because I knew him very well, I can confirm that when Pope John convened the Council, he had no intention whatsoever of effecting what happened afterward. He wanted a Council for ‘perfecting’ the Church, and he repeated frequently, and privately as well, that he wanted a beautiful, splendid, pure, and holy Church, so that all might say, ‘This is the Bride of Christ!’ This was his intention. Perhaps there was some simplicity in this.”

But what happened during the Council?

“The theological program was established by the organizers, who had the task of overseeing the preparation. The beginning was already rather turbulent. Pope John was convinced that the Council should last no longer than Christmas of that same year [1962, the year the Council began — *Ed.*]. From October through the next two or at most three months, everything was to be concluded.”

In such a short time?

“Yes. I remember well one significant detail. The Pope changed Cardinal Testa’s plans [Gustavo Testa, secretary of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches and a close friend of Roncalli’s — *Ed.*]. Testa, who had been given responsibility for the technical organization of the conciliar assembly,

supposing that the work would be extended for several months, thought it best for the Holy See to purchase a sound system. John XXIII, who was convinced otherwise, imposed the choice to rent the equipment. He stated that ‘everything should be finished by the Feast of the Immaculate Conception or by Christmas!’”

What changed things?

“In the first few sessions a movement arose against the Council agenda, and the seventy-two points solemnly approved by the Pope and communicated outside the Vatican were totally rejected. A commission was then nominated to prepare the topics for the Council to consider. That task took another three or four weeks. Only then did John XXIII come to understand that the Council would last a long time. And he resigned himself to that.”

A “turn” that was not in the Pope’s plans.

“Up until that point, he had thought of the Council along the lines of the Roman synod, with fast approvals and very little discussion; the plans of the preparatory commissions should have been sufficient.”

In any case, John XXIII, in a phrase during the opening speech of the Council, distanced himself from the “prophets of doom,” and seemed to open a space for the proposals so dear to those who wanted revolutionary changes. Thus, many progressives thought the Pope was on their side.

“Precisely. I know that he wept over this interpretation. He certainly had no intention of offending anyone; he was incapable of launching an accusation. I hold him in high regard, and I am convinced that that was not his expression; it was prepared for him, he saw it written, and he read it. I know he suffered greatly when it was interpreted as an allusion to someone near to him, and in particular to Cardinal Ottaviani. He truly suffered over that. It made him look like a reformer who had stopped carrying out the discipline of the Church. I was a close friend of his; I knew him very well. I can say that, in his holiness, he was the most conservative of men.”

In any case, the “turn” happened in the name of Pope John.

“The ideas promoted by some, such as [Leo Jozef] Cardinal Suenens and [Augustin] Cardinal

Bea, may have prevailed thanks to those words against the ‘prophets of doom.’ As with the text of that speech — written by who knows who? — many other times his collaborators had broad influence on the Pope and autonomy in steering decisions by the Council.”

Even after the Council?

“Yes, for example in the choices regarding both *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*.”

His differences with Suenens, the archbishop of Brussels, were evident when he was nuncio in Belgium. But beyond the key figures in progressivist theology, when you speak of the Pope’s collaborators you seem to have other names in mind.

“Yes. I am thinking of Msgr. Loris Capovilla and of Msgr. Bruno Heim.”

How was it possible for the “new theology” to gain the upper hand, given the rather small circle of its supporters and a certain isolation from theological production?

“Modernism had never ceased to exist. Anyway, Pope Roncalli was highly tolerant. He was more inclined to take only the positive aspects of things and overlook the aspects that were less good.”

There was an expectation of a springtime in the post-conciliar period, but there came instead, in the words of Paul VI, “a day of clouds, storm, darkness, searching, and uncertainty.” What does this “darkness” have to do with the Council?

“The painful events that followed cannot be blamed on the Council; rather, they happened coincidentally with the new season.”

A “new season” that John XXIII thought should not open?

“Right. He intended the ‘refreshing’ as a ‘purification,’ not as a ‘change.’ Perhaps the deficient preparation for the Council allowed the modernist stream to take control of the situation and to transform the Johannine ‘refreshing’ into a ‘modernization’ of the Church. Thus we have a Vatican II that, in the ‘letter,’ succeeded in the opposite of the ‘spirit’ of the Council, which was at the mercy of the innovators.”

Do you think that some Vatican II texts might have

been misunderstood and that they could have been interpreted as a means to an end?

“Certainly. This has been said again and again in many circumstances. Certainly on the part of some there was a tendency to word things in a way that would allow various interpretations. I am not able to say just where; I am not enough of a theologian.”

One problem that marked the entire century, communism, was never mentioned.

“That is a battle that I sustained along with three or four hundred other bishops. We asked if communism was being discussed in the Council: The question was always refused! It was said that

Scholarship Fund

The Lord commanded: “Feed my sheep” (Jn. 21:17).

Many are the souls who would benefit from the forceful and compelling presentation of the Catholic faith found in the NOR, but who, for various reasons, do not possess the means to do so.

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some cardinals had made commitments to the communist governments to insure that the topic would not even be mentioned, in exchange for the bishops behind the Iron Curtain being granted permission to participate in the Vatican assembly. I have no documentation to prove that. However, it is a fact that our petition never even succeeded in being discussed in the Council. It was said that one of the secretaries had forgotten the request in a drawer; I never believed that excuse.”

In the post-conciliar turmoil, you put much energy into strengthening the dialogue with Msgr. Marcel Lefebvre and to avoid the schism that finally happened in 1988.

“My acquaintance with Msgr. Lefebvre goes back a long way. It goes back to the time of my service in the nunciature in Paris. Msgr. Lefebvre, who was esteemed by Pius XII, was the apostolic delegate for all of French-speaking Africa. When he returned to France, the troubles began because he was not well regarded by the French bishops. Roncalli obviously had the means to follow the matter closely.”

You were not afraid to define Lefebvre as a “holy man,” and in so doing you stirred up a reaction in some of the Catholic press.

“My words were not a proposal for canonization, but rather the recognition of the life of piety and zeal of a bishop of unblemished virtue. On the other hand, the excommunication that Msgr. Lefebvre incurred subtracts nothing from the clarity of his judgment regarding the degeneration of the Church he denounced.”

Was your recognition of the uprightness of the schismatic bishop returned by him about you? Or am I wrong?

“Well, yes. Lefebvre’s esteem and friendship toward me allowed me to do more than others during the last few years to try to bring the bishop and his followers back into full Catholic communion. My task was one of reconciliation.”

Did the polemics surprise you?

“If the cordial treatment extended to many others is welcomed positively, I do not understand why extending it to Msgr. Lefebvre should be a source of irritation. Rather, one should rejoice that

everything possible was done to avoid seeing this pastor of the Church abandoned to separation from the Pope.”



Much has been written about the entire Lefebvrian *affaire*, and the name of Cardinal Oddi appears frequently in the long-standing matter. Many of his attempts to avoid the irreparable are well known. However, an extreme and final attempt by John Paul II is unknown, in which Cardinal Oddi was once again a central figure. Cardinal Oddi was not explicit, and therefore we cannot be certain that what follows is the correct reconstruction. When Msgr. Lefebvre became critically ill, Oddi prepared to go to Ecône, the Swiss center of the Lefebvrian community. At the least sign of repentance, Cardinal Oddi would have immediately released the excommunication that burdened the dying bishop. The mission that Oddi wanted to carry out did not happen because Lefebvre remained immovable to the end. It is improbable that Oddi could have made the decision to visit Lefebvre’s bedside in the hope of granting absolution to the schismatic bishop were this not desired and directly requested by John Paul II. The bishop who opposed the “Johannine turn” died on March 25, 1991, just a few months before the long conversation granted me by Cardinal Oddi.

When this interview was granted, the cause for the beatification of Pope Roncalli was still many steps away from completion. His canonization would have understandably given much joy to his close collaborator and secretary. There is another part of that interview that seems worth preserving, that somehow seems a premonition of the celebration that finally elevated John XXIII and John Paul II to the honor of the altars. When I asked Cardinal Oddi to discuss the slowness of the canonization process of certain figures who were — let’s put it this way — out of fashion (in contrast to other far faster causes), he added, from the depth of his experience, “I proposed — and I am happy to repeat it — the canonization of all of them together as the ‘Holy Popes of the Twentieth Century.’ Truly they were all saints.”

Ten years after that long interview, Cardinal

Oddi finished his earthly sojourn in a small village in the province of Piacenza, not far from where he was born ninety-one years earlier. He died on June

29, 2001, the day of the liturgical feast of the Apostle Peter, whose successors he had served over the course of his entire life. ■

LIVING IN THE YARD WON'T DO

David Mills

THE WHOLE HOUSE

Some Catholics speak of sharing their faith with others as if being a Catholic were secondary and relatively unimportant, as if by being or becoming any sort of Christian a person has arrived home. I've heard this from Catholics of all sorts, often in reaction to something I've written on apologetics. Catholics have told me they would not even think about discussing Catholicism with their evangelical friends, whose faith they believe to be complete as is. I have been told twice, once by a very conservative priest, to beware of "Catholic chauvinism" because I'd suggested that, all things considered, being a Catholic is better than not being a Catholic. A goodly number of Catholics have disparaged even the idea of arguing for the Church, explaining that Catholics should witness by the way we live and that arguments will only drive people away. Some have even suggested that the Church "forbids us to proselytize," defining the word very broadly.

Others make the point indirectly, for example by reacting to a statement in favor of Catholicism by declaring the virtues of Christians outside the Church, as if a statement in favor of Catholicism were automatically a criticism of everyone else. One man told me, probably without realizing how he was patronizing the Protestants he was defending, to "let sleeping dogs lie" because by promoting Catholicism one could unsettle their faith in Christ.

Then there are Catholics who have gotten to know serious Protestant believers, especially evangelicals, and have been so impressed by their faith that they feel inadequate playing up the Catholic distinctives. It's like giving St. Francis of Assisi lessons on friendship with the poor. Others feel happy just to have such friends in the world: people who love the Lord and observe the moral law, which some of their fellow Catholics don't do. They don't feel right in pressing Catholicism upon such people, feeling that if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Some Catholics who think like this know that certain aspects of Catholic teaching and practice will put off even the sympathetic, and even more those who might over time gain sympathy for the Church. These Catholics hope that people who genuinely meet our Lord and grow to know Him more deeply through their churches will come, some day, to enter His Church, as indeed does happen. (It happened to me.) They offer people what stores call a "loss leader," selling something for less than it costs

David Mills, a *Contributing Editor of the NOR*, has edited both *Touchstone* and *First Things*. He writes a column called "Catholic Sense" for the *Pittsburgh Catholic* and other diocesan newspapers, and a weblog for *Patheos* (www.patheos.com/blogs/davidmills). His most recent book is *Discovering Mary*.