

## Sunday 28 B Canonisation of Pope Paul VI

Today's canonisation removes any possible doubt that Montini – to become Pope Paul VI - was a holy man. Questions are still being asked whether he was a good pope.

He was outstanding in learning, breadth of reading, pastoral concern and many other ways. Two or more outstanding encyclicals pointed to the importance of involvement in the modern world. But his encyclical on Responsible Parenthood caused divisions pain and suffering to millions. Was he right? Traditional Catholics say Yes, some perhaps on the grounds that what a Pope says is by that fact automatically so.

50 years on we can compare his strategy with that of Pope Francis.

In 1968 he was faced with a church that was accustomed to getting its truth from the top. The expectations grew – reinforced by the heady euphoria of change coming from the Council – that there would be an official pronouncement sanctioning the so-called artificial means of preventing conception till then seen as wrong in official church teaching. The groundswell of public opinion saw these means as absolute necessities if married couples were to achieve the ideal of responsibility for the number of their children. His encyclical recognised the trust and abilities God was placing on married couples to make all decisions for the good of their children. Yet he could not take the step of a general approval of a practice that had hitherto been judged wrong.

His teaching caused suffering. Yes. But perhaps it was providential. What it did in fact was to change the **general practice of looking to the top for instruction** of how to manage the living out of a Christian marriage. Good conscientious people found it impossible to follow his instruction. And for many the truth gradually dawned that the **discovery of Catholic Doctrine and practical teaching lies in a sharing of the whole church, each drawing on their special charisms**. Alas many have not yet learned it, and especially the clergy.

Notice the change with Francis. We might see the issue of homosexuality as a parallel. When asked to give a statement from the top Francis answers: Who am I to judge? In *The joy of love* he tells people not to come to him for answers about the practicalities of living out Christian principles. Instead he insists on the practice of discernment. The Holy Spirit equips those taking the Christian life seriously with the channel to discover truths both theoretical and practical.

Is this too simple? Paul VI foresaw the evils of the sexual freedom that we see increasing daily. Better that he had talked of this and kept silent about what happens in the bedroom. Francis has not neglected his task of providing help to the exercise of discernment.

So his first encyclical *Lodato Si*. Care of the environment. Out of many issues competing for priority this does not at first sight seem to come first. But it says that we have to live in the world, we are part of it, and our Christian responsibility is to care for the whole of it, human and the rest. That locates firmly where the Christian lives, where the Kingdom of God already is imperfectly and eventually will be when it is whole achieved.

Next *The Joy of the Gospel*. Love and mercy dictate both content and practice. He avoids general statements of principles to be applied deductively to individual instances. In the gospels Jesus meets in individual encounters. He offers parables that have to be interpreted in the circumstance of each person and each age.

In *The joy of love* he enters the same field as Paul VI – but with what a difference. Where there is love, there is God. Fan the little good into flame and do not judge from abstract principles. With telling practical insights and examples he encourages those who cannot get everything right. Church teaching

points the direction; the Holy Spirit is present in each couple to help them find the direction of love in their practical decisions. That is how God is at work with real people.

How fortunate we are to be with Francis. How important that he should prevail in the internal battles of clergy that threaten him and church.