

# GOD'S APPOINTMENT

## Finding the right Pope

By PETER HEBBLETHWAITE

**T**HIS IS not, even remotely, the article the editor asked for. It may be none the worse for that, but at least we should be clear about the nature of the beast. I was pondering indeed, the 'variety of spiritual gifts' when the news came that Pope Paul VI had died. I was whisked away to Rome to report the event for a variety of newspapers and returned, four weeks later, reasonably satisfied at having at least mentioned the name of Cardinal Luciani. But after thirty-three days (thirty-four on some calculations) the pontificate was over, and I was back in Rome again trying to read the entrails and predict — for some reason that was what secular editors wanted above all else — the outcome. I failed to name Cardinal Wojtyla, though I will maintain to my dying day that I got the principle of the thing right: after the August conclave, so swiftly, serenely and harmoniously accomplished, it would be impossible to return to the list of curial officials and Vatican diplomats of the first conclave; the number of 'pastoral' Italian cardinals was running out; and, therefore, the October conclave would have to produce a 'different kind of surprise'. We now know that it did, in the shape of the first non-Italian for four hundred and fifty-five years, who also happened to be young, fifty-eight years of age, and from a communist country. The pundits, including myself, had, in the picturesque phrase beloved of BBC commentators, egg all over their faces.

But there are other ways of looking at the events of last year. It was not simply a lesson in humility. It was a spiritual experience of a particularly intense kind which raised fundamental problems about the nature of God's intervention in human affairs and the purpose of ministry in the Church. Cardinal Luciani, in the days before he was elected pope, never spoke about the conclave to the fathers, brothers and sisters of the Augustinian house of St Monica where he was staying. But when one day two of the nuns asked him what he thought about certain speculations in the Italian press, he said:

'Journalists should learn to write less and pray more'. I am not at all certain that prayer was the best way to penetrate the secrets of the two conclaves; and people who are paid for having opinions cannot be expected to fall silent; but it was a salutary warning that this event — or these events — were not accessible to the ordinary processes of journalistic investigation. There was an extra factor, a plus, which was not reducible to human logic.

The first problem was about how the Holy Spirit acts. For some commentators it seemed that the Holy Spirit was the hundred and twelfth and most important member of the conclave. There were — both times — one hundred and eleven cardinals, but what they did and said was of minimal importance compared with what the Holy Spirit, the 'great elector', was whispering in their ears. *Osservatore Romano*, which tripled its circulation during this period, had no doubt about this. In one of its Sunday editions, it reproduced a painting by Sebastiano Rossi, in which one saw red biretta-ed cardinals in the background, while an intense blaze of light fell upon the papal tiara and the pontifical vestments. But if some tried to over-spiritualize the conclave, others reduced it to a political affair of factions and of deals to be made. And it was a distressing fact that very often those who talked most about the Holy Spirit were the very ones who most thought in political terms. It was as though talk of the Spirit was for public consumption, while the tough bargaining approach represented the inner reality of the events. If that were all that could be said, then the severe judgment of Bernard Besret, the former prior of Boquen in Normandy, would have fitted: the conclaves were 'the psychodrama of Christian alienation'. A group of a hundred or so, unrepresentative by their age and their sex, were determining the course of the Church till the end of the twentieth century.

The *function* of the Spirit-talk was evident: before the event. It conditioned Christians into acceptance of the wisdom of what was about to happen: after the event it ensured general enthusiasm. I was reminded of Georges Izard's remark in his *Lettre Afligée au General de Gaulle*: 'Before you act, we do not know what you are about to do; after your action we can only applaud'. There must surely be a more subtle theology of the Holy Spirit than that. There is. And oddly enough, it came from both the right and the left (the terms are used simply to designate those who thought that Vatican II was a disaster, or those who thought that it was the best thing that had happened to the Church in four hundred years). Cardinal

Giuseppe Siri would not mind being described as a conservative. In his *novendiales* sermon on Pope Paul VI, he warned his brother cardinals against saying 'Let us be guided by the Holy Spirit', as though this meant that they would not have to work hard and to suffer. I suspect that he meant that they should not, in a rush of charismatic enthusiasm, elect a pope from the third world in order to please the groundlings of the world press. On the other hand, his warning was echoed by Cardinal Basil Hume in his sermon in the 'english' church of San Silvestro on the Wednesday before the August conclave. God works through his human instruments, said Cardinal Hume, and human responsibility can never be abdicated.

The election of Cardinal Luciani, which was, in the event, practically unanimous (confer the pastoral letter of Cardinal Höffner to the diocese of Cologne), was experienced as a triumph of the Holy Spirit. He was, in Cardinal Hume's phrase, 'God's candidate'. That is to say that he was not the candidate of a faction or an individual, but had somehow 'emerged' as 'the right man at the right time'. No one quite knew how this had happened, and many cardinals confessed that they had not had him in mind or even known very much about him. The wisdom of their choice was confirmed in his whirlwind pontificate. He presented a programme the day after his election — an unprecedented step — in which there was something for everyone; and his popularity with the roman crowd was not in doubt. He smiled. After the rather tortured pontificate of Pope Paul VI, this was a novelty. He had a homely style and a great gift for popular communication. His discourses were full of references to Pinocchio and the roman satirical poet Bello. His was a rags-to-riches story of a very simple lad from the mountains of Belluno, who seemed surprised to find himself first Patriarch of Venice and now pope. All was well. The college of cardinals was vindicated. They went home with a sense of a job well done. They had surprised the world, jabbed the press in the eye, and found a pope for the late twentieth century. But then, thirty-four days later, he died, and the whole elaborate and costly process had to begin all over again.

The death of Pope John Paul I raised even more questions than his election had done. Who can justify the ways of God to men? Did it mean that the cardinals had been mistaken in August? Very quickly a new theory was devised to cope with the unexpected situation. Once again it was expressed in the *novendiales* or official mourning ceremonies. Pope Luciani, it was said, had done 'all that

in him lay'. He had transformed the papacy in a short time. He had abolished the coronation ceremony, and, for a time at least, the *sedes gestatoria*. His brief pontificate had been a vision of hope. It evoked a Church without conflicts, without issues, presided over by a genial, smiling pope who loved children, the poor and the third world. Since this evidently could not last, it had been abruptly ended. His work done, God had called Pope John Paul I to himself. He did all that in him lay; and then, in the vivid phrase of Cardinal Timothy Manning of Los Angeles, 'he dropped off the stage'. According to Cardinal Carlo Confalonieri, 'the meteor had flashed across the sky, and departed'. He had fulfilled, according to Cardinal Ugo Poletti, Vicar of Rome, 'his entire mission'.

We do not know how the pontificate of Pope John Paul I would have developed. There were a number of distressing signs that his inexperience and — let us not mince words — weakness could have led to trouble. He quickly confirmed all the curial officials in their jobs, thus missing the opportunity to renew a body which is always in danger of being self-perpetuating. He made diplomatic *gaffes*. Addressing spanish pilgrims, he cheerfully exclaimed *Arriba España*, evidently not realizing that this was a fascist slogan, now discredited in democratic Spain. He wrote a letter to the mayor of Jerusalem, and naïvely addressed it to the State of Israel — thus implicitly conferring the diplomatic recognition that the Vatican had previously withheld (pending a general peace settlement). But more serious for the life of the Church was what happened when he took possession of his cathedral church of St John Lateran on the Saturday before he died. Busloads of people from the shanty-towns around Rome came into the city to see the pope who was the son of a worker. But he said Mass in Latin — which they did not understand — and denounced a false notion of liturgical 'creativity'. They thought he was denouncing the sort of Masses they celebrated. Disappointment was great. However, to chronicle the ways the pontificate could have gone wrong is a melancholy and hazardous task.

By dying when he did, Pope John Paul I was spared the conflicts that would inevitably have arisen, and so was enabled to enter history as the pope who created a new and popular style. The abandonment of the tiara was a sign of his determination to make the papal office one of pastoral service rather than power. He was pastor, not sovereign. No future pope could go back on that fundamental decision without repudiating, in a most dramatic way, Pope John Paul I's heritage to the Church.

But he also prepared the way for his successor. If he had not died so suddenly, it is likely that the idea that the right age for a pope to be was in his sixties would have gone unchallenged: and in any case there would have been no opportunity to challenge it. It was also known that he himself thought that the time was ripe for a non-italian pope, and that he had consistently voted in the August conclave for Cardinal Aloisio Lorscheider of Brazil. Moreover, the harmonious 'miracle' of August could not be repeated: some of the foreigners were a little more alive to what should be called, not exactly 'plotting', but 'preparation in depth'. To go into an assembly like the conclave without having some sort of plan would have seemed absurd to the majority of curial cardinals, who were more directly concerned with the succession, and did not think that they were pre-empting the Spirit by taking steps. In the end, and as far as can be gleaned, the steps they took led to the neutralization of italian candidates: and therefore, without intending it, to the emergence of Cardinal Karol Wojtyla. Was that perhaps an instance of 'God writing straight on crooked lines'?

History shows that most popes tend to tinker with the rules of the conclave. This may reflect the dissatisfaction they felt at the conclave which elected them. Pope Paul VI's rewriting of the rules, enshrined in *Romano Pontifice Eligendo*, was fierce and contemporary only on the matter of secrecy — electronic devices of any kind were not to be taken in; but perhaps its most important provision was the exclusion of cardinals over eighty. Since, strictly speaking, the only function of a cardinal is to elect the next pope, to deprive the over-eighties of that right was to deal them a severe blow. It was also to hint — though in the vaguest possible way — that the conclave did not have to be the exclusive preserve of the sacred college. Pope Paul VI had toyed with this possibility in 1972 — perhaps oriental patriarchs or members of the Synod Secretariat could take part — only to reject it. I suspect that Pope John Paul II, with his keen sense of collegiality, will come round to a revision of conclave procedures.

The anomaly of the 1978 conclaves was that they depended upon a series of legal fictions. The first was that the cardinals may be thought to 'represent' the parish priests of the city of Rome. This is a tribute to an historical past, but hardly a very 'existential' statement about what actually happens. Quite evidently the cardinals represent the Church in its universal aspect: Pope Paul's own nominations, which altered the balance away from Europe, showed that he had grasped this point in practice. Nevertheless, his apostolic constitution

still claimed that the event was essentially 'Roman'. It may be that the 'roman' aspect of the conclaves was brought out better by the reception given by the crowd in St Peter's Square rather than by the fact that cardinal priests have the title of roman churches. The latter is a convention: the former can be experienced.

The second anomaly was that the apostolic constitution insisted that the conclave was 'in a certain sense an event of the whole Church'; and yet the conditions of strict secrecy imposed meant that 'the whole Church', despite the guesswork of the media, was excluded from the event. Of course, one could 'spiritualize' again, and say that the whole Church was involved to the extent that it was praying with the cardinals, and hoping that they would make a wise choice. Cardinal Wyszkinski, indeed, explained the happy outcome of the first conclave by the fact that over a million polish Catholics were assembled on that very day — 26 August — to pray at the shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa. But it is a very 'paternalistic' form of involvement which allows one to pray for the cardinals, but not to know what happens. There is, no doubt, a good argument for secrecy in the conclave. Cardinal François Marty of Paris put it best when he said that it was required out of 'respect for persons'.

But in the end these arguments are not decisive. Office in the Church — and the Petrine office is no exception — comes *through* human agencies, but in the last resort it does not come *from* them: the mandate and the mission come from Christ. It would not be shattering to know how the human agents actually arrived at their conclusion. True, it would make the whole process less arcane and therefore less capable of mystification; but the Church does not really profit from bogus mystery.

Conclaves in the past had to fear the veto of european princes. The 1978 conclaves felt the pressure of public opinion, which was, as usual, mediated by the press. Several hundred journalists went to Rome and turned an intense spotlight, for a few brief months, on men who in the ordinary run of things are not widely known. It is difficult to know exactly how these pressures worked. Officially, most cardinals claimed simultaneously that they were not influenced by the press, and at the same time read it with some avidity. It seems fairly certain, for example, that Cardinal Siri dished his chances — which were never very great — by an injudicious interview given to *Gazetta del Populo* on the eve of the second conclave. The pressure of public opinion may have worked less straightforwardly. The fact that the cardinals produced not one but two surprises was a splendid

way of 'biffing the press in the eye', while at the same time 'choosing the best man available'. Reflecting on the inaccurate predictions, I reached the conclusion that in August commentators were misled because they did not listen with sufficient attention to what the cardinals were actually saying (they stressed the need for a 'pastoral', that is, a non-curial candidate, and were not opposed to an Italian); while in October they were misled because they did not credit the cardinals with the courage and imagination which they displayed.

One final question — from among many others — that is worth a moment's reflection is how far 'spirituality' counted in the two conclaves. Cardinal John J. Dearden of Chicago had said that 'spirituality' was a quality that could be instantly and instinctively recognized. That implied that not all cardinals, however otherwise worthy, possessed this instantly recognizable quality. Both Luciani and Wojtyla did possess it. I am tempted to attribute this to the fact that both of them, in their youth, were drawn in their theological studies to topics which made them familiar with writers who were of more than academic interest. It is true that Luciani's thesis on Rosmini was a polemical work on the origin of the soul in an author who was still considered, in roman universities, suspect. But the influence of *The Five Wounds of the Church*, Rosmini's great reforming work, is clearly discernible in the way Luciani set about administering the diocese of Vittoria Veneto in the years before the Council. In Rosmini's diagnosis the five wounds were: the separation of the people from the clergy in liturgy; the defective education of priests; disunity among bishops; the nomination of bishops by the secular power; and the Church's enslavement to wealth. Only the fourth of these points — the nomination of bishops by the secular power — had ceased to be relevant in 1958, when Pope John made him Bishop of Vittoria Veneto. The other points were part of his pastoral programme for the diocese. And the Council reinforced his determination to make them stick. The Council was, as he said, an opportunity for 'conversion and going back to school'. The idea that the Church should be and be seen to be 'the Church of the poor' was ingrained in him. It affected the way he 'took possession' of the diocese of Venice in 1970, and the abandonment of the tiara and other trappings when he became pope in 1978.

Wojtyla's formation was more subtle, complicated and intellectual. Poetry and the theatre had made him sensitive to language and human feelings. It was not surprising that someone who emerged from a German-occupied Poland should have been drawn to St

John of the Cross when he went to the Angelicum in 1946. To someone coming from war-ravaged Poland, the idea that God is best reached by the *via negativa*, by the emptying out of distracting images, must have seemed congenial. His dissertation, directed by the veteran Thomist Père Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, was on 'The Concept of Faith in St John of the Cross'. This made sense. For the Spanish mystical poet, faith appears as a series of paradoxes: it is the darkness that illuminates, the music that is soundless. But Wojtyła's thesis for the Catholic University of Lublin is even more interesting. Max Scheler (1874-1928) is now largely forgotten, and though the thesis was philosophical in character, it had obvious implications for theology and spirituality. Scheler's starting-point was the irreducible uniqueness of humanizing emotions such as love: it could not be reduced to a merely biological instinct, or a cry for help, or Freud's *Id*. It was the 'pioneer of values': that is, the way by which goodness is apprehended and discovered. Unless we love, we cannot claim to know. This was in fact the revival of a theme dear to St Augustine. Scheler, moreover, laid great stress on the importance of 'models' in the moral life: unless we have heroes, or better, saints, to look up to, the moral life will remain flabby and undirected. All these ideas remained part of Wojtyła's outlook, and can be traced in his later writings such as *Person and Acts* and especially *Love and Responsibility* (first published in Polish in 1960), in which he defended the anti-contraception position of the Church, but expressed it in terms of person rather than of nature. *Love and Responsibility* may be said to have anticipated *Humanae Vitae*.

But these intellectual reference-points were merely the initial prompting for the development of a spirituality which owes as much to the Polish situation as to early reading. Although Wojtyła appreciates 'Polish peasant piety', he also knows that an educated laity is needed if faith is to survive other than merely as a protest (voting with one's knees), and he is too much of a theologian to reduce theology to mariology. The retreat which he gave to the Roman Curia in Lent 1976<sup>1</sup> shows clearly a fundamental Christian humanism and personalism that will mark his *magisterium*. It is a spirituality that includes dialogue with men as well as dialogue with God. It is uncompromising and yet open, firm and yet ready to learn. It can see us through to the end of the century.

<sup>1</sup> Published as *Segno di Contraddizione* (Milan, 1977).