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VATICAN - WORDS OF DOCTRINE by Rev Nicola Bux and Rev Salvatore Vitiello - Pius XII and Catholic doctrine: if we cannot promote and defend it, we cannot diffuse it

Vatican City (Agenzia Fides) - We are approaching the 50 anniversary of the death a great Pope, Pius XII in Castelgandolfo on 9 October 1958. The Catholic Church owes him no less than it owes Pope John XXIII. “What remains unknown to many – said the Rector of the Lateran University, Archbishop Rino Fisichella, presenting the Congress and exhibition which will be held in the Vatican in the Autumn– is the influence Pius XII had on Vatican II. His profound and farsighted teaching can be verified in the sequence of the 43 Encyclicals which marked his Pontificate and numerous discourses with which he tackled the most controversial issues of the epoch”.

The traits of this magisterium are promotion and defence of doctrine, the identification of errors. In fact unless we are unable to defend a certain thing we cannot diffuse it. Some might find this over triumphal: the fact that ambiguity and confusion increase where people are unable to distinguish between what is true and what is untrue.

As it has been demonstrated by Jesuit Father Peter Gumpel, if we examine at the minutes of the Council Fathers' discussions, his name is mentioned in no less than 1.500 interventions. In the notes of Council documents Pius XII is cited over 200 times. He is the most recurrent citation, except for Sacred Scripture.

Unanimous acknowledgement of the heroic virtues of the Servant of God on the part of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, on 8 May 2007, is waiting to be sanctioned by His Holiness Benedict XVI. This will be an eloquent signal for a correct hermeneutics of the Second Vatican Council. In fact some speak of a line of discontinuity between the pre-Council and the post-Council Church, but they contradict themselves: on the one hand they call it the “new beginning” of the Church, on the other they reduced it to a “general council of the Roman Catholic Church”, setting it with other medieval and modern councils (from Constantinople IV to Vatican I) arbitrarily considered non ecumenical like the first seven (cfr intervention W. Brandmuller, Quando un Concilio è davvero ecumenico? in Avvenire, 13 July 2004, p 24).

Those who prefer this interpretation tend to counterposition Pius XII and John XXIII, forgetting among other things the great act of acknowledgement made by his Predecessor in the funeral oration and in the first encyclical Ad Petri Cathedram defining him “Doctor optimus, Ecclesiae sanctae lumen, divinae legis admonitor”. These are the three titles which a liturgical antiphon in the Roman Missal confers on Doctors of the Church.

In actual fact, as Pope Benedict XVI recalled in his address to the Roman Curia on 22 December 2005, in the history of the Church there is no discontinuity, there is a linear process. Pope Pius XII anticipated and prepared the Council, just think of the liturgical reform he launched with the encyclical Mediator Dei or the encyclical Divino afflante Spiritu on the study of Sacred Scripture. The Council brought to conclusion what had been started under his Pontificate. There is no “counterposition” between Pius XII and John XXIII, as Pope Paul VI showed by opening at the same time the causes for the Beatification of both his predecessors.

Last of all we recall that Pius XII fought the ideologies and dictatorships of his day, staying in Rome when all other authorities had fled. The motto of his pontificate “opus iustitiae pax” summarises the sacrifice of his life for peace, through the promotion of justice for those suffering from discrimination. The faithful and citizens of Rome have inscribed him in their memory as Defensor Civitatis as it can be seen from the plaque in a square which bears his name situated not far from St Peter's. (Agenzia Fides 19/06/2008)

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