

Loris Capovilla, Pope John XXIII and Vatican II



John XXIII and Fr Loris Capovilla

“After the Second World War, it was a very good thing that there arose three international institutions: the U.N. for peace, the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) for bread, UNESCO for culture,” Cardinal Capovilla recalls the pope saying. “Why don’t we get together to talk?” That “Talk” would develop into no less than the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1962-1965).

Loris Capovilla recalls that ‘tipping point’ for Pope John:

‘He (Pope John) told me: "In order to address all the problems that are submitted to me from all over the world, something exceptional is needed." It had already happened in the origins of Christianity: "In the Acts of the Apostles, every decision follows the same formula: "So it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." To us, not to me.'”

Loris Francesco Capovilla never let either his friend Pope John or the Council be forgotten. We are indebted to his faithful witness to both.

During the last three years of his life, Capovilla has lived to see the first Pope in well over years finally begin to take Vatican II seriously again.

Capovilla was witness to the inspired leadership of Pope John, his successor Paul VI and the great reform and renewal which was initiated by the Council

Cardinal Loris Francesco Capovilla died on May 26, 2016 aged 100. He was probably the very last of those personally linked to Pope John XXIII. He was with Angelo Roncalli, later Pope, before, during and after Vatican II. He witnessed the years of the Council's reception, its uneven implementation and the decades during which many of its key teachings were effectively sidelined or rejected. Capovilla deserves to be regarded as a treasure of the modern Church, as one who served as a loyal guardian of many of its most valuable memories. (1) Some of the key people and dramatic moments in Capovilla's life of service to and friendship with Angelo Roncalli/Pope John XXIII are highlighted in this reflection.

In March 1953 Cardinal Angelo Roncalli, the new Patriarch of Venice, invited Fr Loris Capovilla to be his personal secretary, a position he would hold after the Cardinal's election as Pope John XXIII in 1958. Following Pope John's death in 1962, Capovilla served for a short time as secretary of John's successor, Paul VI. In 1967 Paul nominated Capovilla as Archbishop of Chieti and later as Prelate of Loreto.

One of Capovilla's most vivid memories of his time with John XXIII dates from just five days after the papal election. The new Pope had already become so thoroughly convinced that the entire world including the Catholic Church had reached a critical moment in its history and faced unavoidable tough choices about its future. This would involve making fundamentally risky choices which required enormous nerve, a strong sense of direction and a firmly grounded optimism. Pope John confided in his private secretary that something urgent had to be done in, with and for the Church, "On my table pour a lot of problems, questions and concerns. It would take something new and singular, not just a Holy Year. We need a Council." (2) In fact, John envisaged a new Pentecost.

Two matters of great importance should to be considered in any account of what happened in the lead up to the Second Vatican Council: firstly, Pope John did not act unilaterally in calling Vatican II. He canvassed the views of bishops throughout the world and received overwhelming support from them; secondly, the Roman Curia, led by Cardinal Ottaviani of the Holy Office, was commissioned to do the documentary preparation for the Council but the Curial commissioners wrote up the working documents in such a way that the outcomes of the Council were predetermined and written into the script. Ottaviani and associates wanted to ensure that any reforms of Church structures, policies and processes would be minimal and that the culture of presumed privilege and entitlement of the bureaucratic status quo would not be greatly disturbed. Nothing has changed in that regard.

The late Robert Blair Kaiser, a Rome-based American reporter for *Time Magazine* at the time of the Council, later recalled:

“The top cardinal in Rome, Alfredo Ottaviani, the pro-prefect of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, could not conceive of any of the changes that the word *aggiornamento* (updating; making ‘relevant’) implied, and I soon found out from theologians like Yves Congar, Jean Danielou, Karl Rahner, and Edward Schillebeeckx (all of whom had been silenced before Vatican II for their ‘radical thinking’) that Ottaviani was doing almost everything he could to put roadblocks in the way of Council’s major change-projects. And why wouldn’t he? His coat of arms said it all: *Semper Idem*. Always the same.” (3)

Jesuit Cardinal Augustin Bea, a noted biblical scholar and Prefect of the *Congregation for Christian Unity*, also reflected some of the anxiety of those expecting that the Council would move the Church forward and not propell it backwards. The major concern of Bea, other ‘progressive’ bishops and theologians was that Ottaviani and his Curial associates would continue to run interrence strategies and effectively bury the Council down under the sheer weight of its own self-interested agenda:

‘Two weeks before its opening, Cardinal Bea declared, “We must help the Holy Father achieve his goals for the Council, the ones he expresses in his radio messages and exhortations. These are not the same ones as those of the schemas, either because the Theological Commission, which directs them, is closed to the world and to ideas of peace, justice and unity, or because of the division of the work and the lack of coordination. They have made room for everything except the Holy Spirit”’ (4)

Equipped with considerable native skill and a disarming, persuasive personality, Loris Capovilla proved that he was a consummate tactician especially in the way he was able, with great success, to get around many of the bureaucratic obstacles and hostility many in the Roman Curia were using to stall preparations for the Council. As Massimo Faggioli comments, Capovilla was probably able to achieve results a great deal more effectively and speedily than Pope John would have been able to accomplish:

As secretary of the pope succeeding Pius XII, who governed in almost total isolation, Capovilla had the delicate job of navigating the arcana of the Roman Curia, where many saw Roncalli as a dangerous and naïve outsider. Audiences and meetings that resulted in some of the most consequential decisions by John XXIII were made possible by Capovilla, who bypassed the obstacles put up by the Curia. This helped John XXIII do what John XXIII wanted to do. But Capovilla operated differently than did his successors—namely, the secretaries to John Paul II and Benedict XVI. (5)

Even though it is clear that Pope John may not be categorised as either a ‘progressive’ or a ‘conservative’, he was, nevertheless, a man of profound insight, a realist and risk-taker. As a result of his considerable experience both as Vatican visitor in Bulgaria and also as Apostolic Delegate to Greece and Turkey, John had become profoundly convinced that the Catholic Church needed to listen very attentively to what was happening in the outside world, learn from it and shape its identity accordingly: “ ‘Let us open the windows and let us listen,’ because the church is irrelevant if it is not listening to the world.”

As it emerged, Pope John’s address at the opening of Vatican II on October 11, 1962 provided the inspiration, encouragement and guidance needed to ensure that the bishops would be participants in the first truly Ecumenical Council which would rejoice in the

richness of the Church's Tradition while being outward-looking, theologically informed like no other Council, genuinely engaged with other religious traditions, with secular society and seeking to communicate with them in mature, coherent language:

“..... and the apostolic spirit of the whole world expects a step forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciousness in faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought.”

The course of the Council was changed decisively within fifteen minutes of the opening of the first session when Cardinal Achille Liénart of Lille moved that the election of conciliar commission leaders be put off pending further thought and consideration by the Council Fathers. This motion was seconded by Cardinal Josef Frings of Cologne and, with thunderous applause, the Council Fathers adjourned. The tactic worked. When the Council reconvened, the Curial candidates for the commissions were ignored and their contrived working documents thrown out as well. Despite vociferous objections from Cardinal Ottaviani, Pope John supported the will of the Council which rarely looked back.

A concluding thought

Capovilla now occupies a privileged place in modern Church history because, for decades, he became an immensely important guardian of the legacy of the memory of John XXII and trustworthy interpreter of the transformative event of the Second Vatican Council. These were revolutionary times during which the Church committed itself to a programme of sweeping reforms in addition to renewal and enormous change on every level. During the lean years of revisionism and regression during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Capovilla continued quietly and unobtrusively to bear loyal and credible witness to the central importance of Vatican II in the life of the Catholic Church. Vatican II marked an historical turning point in the Church's relationship with the secular world and it affirmed a commitment to a future of hopefulness and a clear direction away from sterile introspection and complacent nostalgia. John XXIII's papacy marked the beginning of an era of a new form of language used by the Church at Vatican II and in its subsequent internal conversations and external dialogues. (6) It is the pastoral language of persuasion and inclusion not the brittle policies of condemnation and exclusion.

All this was obviously not lost on Jorge Bergoglio during the post-Vatican II years of his own formation and ministries. A strong indication of this was his public recognition of Archbishop Capovilla two years ago by welcoming him into the College of Cardinals.

Endnotes:

- 1) Carol Glatz, "Former secretary to St John XXIII dies, aged 100" *Cathnews* 27th May, 2016 (Link [here](#))
- 2) Giacomo Galeazzi, "Vatican II simultaneously encapsulated loyalty and renewal. The 'Vatican Insider' interviews Archbishop Loris Capovilla, personal secretary to John XXIII, on the Second Vatican Council," *La Stampa. Vatican Insider*, 05/02/2012. (Link [here](#)) Capovilla later reminisced:

'And with humility, John XXIII (added): "The Council is chaired by our Lord, I'll be only the chaplain." Capovilla emphasizes: "The Second Vatican Council was the first truly ecumenical council, because the one convoked by Pius IX did not gather in Rome bishops from around the world but only the Western noble prelates who represented the Church in distant lands. In 1869 there were no bishops from Africa, and a bishop is only such inasmuch as he shares in the real lives of his faithful. Many wonder how it occurred to John XXIII to bring together the world's bishops, yet coming together to resolve issues exists in the history of the Church." Just after he wrote *Pacem in Terris*, making reference to *The Imitation of Christ*, he said: "The peaceful man does more good than the highly educated man."

"I see him (John XXIII) again that night, walking back and forth with his rosary in his hands, while I, a bit lost, overwhelmed by a thousand thoughts, I could not make sense of this new and unexpected situation."

- 3) Robert Blaire Kaiser, "Don't let anyone say the Council didn't change" *The Tablet*, 11 October, 2012) (Link [here](#))
- 4) Etienne Fouilloux, *Vatican II Commences*, (Louvain, 1993), 72, n. 56.
- 5) Massimo Faggioli, "The Popes' Secretaries, from Capovilla to Gänswein," *Commonweal*, June 2, 2016. Faggioli's article is full enlightening insights into the crucial role papal secretaries have played in the policy making and governance of the Catholic Church over the past sixty or so years. (Link [here](#))
- 6) "Capovilla has devoted his whole life in the style of [Blessed John XXIII] to keep alive the dialogue with the great religious tradition of Judaism; with the community of Taizé in which he made a gift of Pope John compendium which, I can testify, was held in the cell that was of Brother Schutz; with the various Orthodox Churches. Patriarch Bartholomew met him personally in Sotto il Monte. [He] kept epistolary contacts with men of culture, journalists, politicians, like Gorbachev, workers, youth, businessmen, missionaries, priests and people of all faiths and even non-believers.'" Ettore Malnati, "Capovilla kept alive the legacy of Pope John," *La Stampa. Vatican Insider*, 26/05/2016.

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