

Pope Paul VI Oral History Statement – JFK#1, circa 1964

Administrative Information

Creator: Pope Paul VI

Date of Statement: circa 1964

Length: 4 pages, 1 addendum

Biographical Note

Pope Paul VI (1897-1978) was the Supreme Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church from 1963 to 1978. This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy's 1963 visit to the Vatican and the Vatican's reaction to his election, among other topics.

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Pope Paul VI, circa 1964 (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Oral History Statement

Of

Pope Paul VI

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FOREWORD

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John Smith (interviewee), recorded interview by
Bill Jones (interviewer), date, page, John F. Kennedy
Library Oral History Program

We received the official visit of the President of the United States of America John F. Kennedy on July 2, 1963, a few days after our election to the Roman Pontificate; and this special circumstance contributed to giving our spirit a profound impression of that meeting, and gave us great hope for our new apostolic ministry upon making this contact with the most exalted and most significant representatives of the world.

The fame of the man and the importance of his formidable office aroused in us a good deal of respect and some trepidation. His name was not entirely unknown to us. We learned to regard with respect the name of the Family Kennedy on the occasion of the coronation of our great and venerated predecessor, Pío XII, which was celebrated in St. Peter's Basilica on March 12, 1939. At that time we were acting in a substitute capacity as a Secretary of State, and as such we had to arrange the places for the missions specially invited from the various States to the great ceremony; it was most difficult to assign a place to everyone, because the space was limited and the assemblage very great. It happened that the Ambassador of the United States to London, Mr. Kennedy, father of the dead President, was charged by his Government to represent the United States at the ceremony;

and indeed he arrived punctually but bringing with him five children, who proceeded to occupy places that were reserved for the members of the official Missions, with the result that the arrangement of places was altered; and when there arrived the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Count Ciano, the son-in-law of Mussolini, he found his seat in the Gallery of the official Missions was occupied and he began to protest, threatening to leave the Basilica and to desert the ceremony. The situation was immediately resolved; but there remained in our memory the procession of the children of Ambassador Kennedy, then very young; among them was John, the future President. We had the honor also of later meeting Ambassador Kennedy; and so we had reason to become more appreciative of the merit of the diplomat and the composition of the family, proven by the heroic death of one of his sons during the war, and distinguished by charitable work (the Joseph Kennedy Home) designed to perpetuate the memory of the valorous fallen.

But what greatly disposed our soul to welcome the illustrious visitor with profound respect and with particular interest was the thought of the election of President John F. Kennedy to the head of the great Nation of the United States of America. For us the address he gave at the moment of taking possession of his high office had been the object of admiration and of reflection. We were at that time still at Milan. We read and reread with amazement and with satisfaction those short words, simple, strong, full of moral

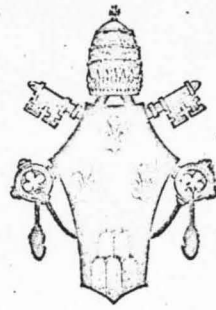
significance; few discourses seemed to us so elevated and so felicitous, and they evoked in our memory some of the purest and most vigorous classical and sacred eloquence. During the audience with the President we did not conceal from him that impression of ours, and there came to our lips the words "It was a masterpiece" [In English in the original], referring to that address, which seems to us not only the synthesis of the President's program but also the spiritual definition of the young and energetic statesman, who with those words inaugurated a style of government that we must contemplate with satisfaction and with confidence.

From then we have followed with great interest the unfolding of the program of President Kennedy, not so much to pass judgment on its political merits, but rather to verify whether the moral promises contained in that solemn first discourse were fulfilled; and it was for us, as it was for all who saw in John Kennedy the new man destined to bring peace and prosperity to the world--a joyful and thought-provoking experience to hear the same accents of human nobility/as in the address, as he proceeded with the fulfillment: the words, for example, by him pronounced at Berlin were a message that history must understand and the world ponder on.

This capacity to speak to modern society in concrete terms, as is characteristic of American practical genius, and with the inspiration that derives from the true understanding of humanity--that of which the Catholic community

is custodian and master--seems to us to constitute the profound reason for the unique grandeur of the incomparable President: he has restored politics, economy, sociology to their human origins and to moral finalities; he has impressed on our modern conscience an energy, new and old at the same time, of faith and of love; he had rekindled our civilization, characterized by the conquest of the cosmos and by its immense resources, with transcendent hope; this will not be extinguished, for the memory of John Kennedy will guard and keep it.

We remember this young Head of State, modest and courteous, before us during our meeting; and still we see his serene and virile face immersed in deep thought. He hesitated a long time, he spoke frankly and softly, like one who wishes to find the right words and to speak good words. God, to whom he did not disdain to lift his mind and bow his head, will save, we hope, his great spirit for eternal life, while the tragedy that cut off that noble earthly life must have for everyone this providential secret: To remember to understand his spiritual bequest is to continue his moral mission.



Noi abbiamo ricevuto la visita ufficiale del Presidente degli Stati Uniti d'America John F. Kennedy il 2 luglio 1963, pochi giorni dopo la nostra elezione al Pontificato Romano; ed anche questa circostanza contribuì a segnare nel nostro spirito una profonda impressione di quell'incontro, che ci dava viva esperienza del nostro nuovo ministero apostolico, aperto ormai ai contatti con i più alti e più significativi rappresentanti del mondo.

La fama dell'Uomo e l'importanza del suo formidabile ufficio ci incutevano molta riverenza e qualche trepidazione. Il suo nome non era a noi privo di qualche ricordo. Noi imparammo a considerare con rispetto il nome della Famiglia Kennedy in occasione dell'incoronazione del nostro grande e venerato predecessore Pio XII, la quale fu celebrata nella basilica di San Pietro il 12 marzo 1959. A quel tempo noi avevamo l'incarico di Sostituto della Segreteria di Stato; e come tale dovevamo disporre i posti per le Missioni speciali inviate dai vari Stati alla grande cerimonia; era molto difficile assegnare un posto a tutti, perchè lo spazio era limitato e l'affluenza assai numerosa. Avvenne che l'Ambasciatore degli Stati Uniti d'America a Londra, il Signor Kennedy, padre del defunto Presidente, fu incaricato dal suo Governo di rappresentare gli Stati Uniti alla cerimonia; e difatti egli arrivò puntuale, ma portando con sè cinque figli, i quali occuparono posti, che erano riservati ai Membri delle Missioni ufficiali, così che l'ordine dei posti fu alterato; e quando arrivò il Ministro

degli Esteri Italiano, il conte Ciano, genero di Mussolini, non trovò più libera la sua sedia nella tribuna delle Missioni ufficiali, e cominciò a protestare minacciando di lasciare la Basilica e di disertare la cerimonia. L'incidente trovò subito rimedio; ma rimase nella nostra memoria la fila dei figli dell'Ambasciatore Kennedy, allora molto giovani; e tra essi era allora anche John, il futuro Presidente. Noi avemmo l'onore d'incontrare anche successivamente l'Ambasciatore Kennedy; e tanto bastò per farci molto apprezzare il valore del Diplomatico e la composizione della sua Famiglia, provata dall'eroica morte d'uno dei suoi figli durante la guerra, e distinta per l'opera benefica (Joseph Kennedy Home), destinata a perpetuare la memoria del valoroso caduto.

Ma ciò che maggiormente disponeva il nostro animo ad accogliere l'illustre Visitatore con profondo rispetto e con particolare interesse era il ricordo della elezione del Presidente John F. Kennedy a capo della grande Nazione degli Stati Uniti d'America. Per noi era stato oggetto di ammirazione e di riflessione il discorso da lui pronunciato al momento della presa di possesso della sua alta carica. Noi eravamo a quel tempo ancora a Milano. Noi leggemmo e rileggemmo con stupore e con soddisfazione quelle parole brevi, semplici, forti, piene di significato morale; pochi discorsi come quello ci parvero così alti e così felici, e ci rievocarono la memoria della più pura e vigorosa eloquenza classica e sacra. Durante l'udienza con il Presidente noi non gli tacemmo quella nostra impressione, e ci venne

alle labbra la parola "it was a masterpiece", riferita a quel discorso, che ci sembra non solo la definizione sintetica del programma presidenziale, ma ancor più la definizione spirituale del giovane ed energico Uomo di Stato, che con quelle parole inaugurava uno stile di governo, al quale anche noi dobbiamo guardare con soddisfazione e con fiducia.

Da allora abbiamo seguito con interesse lo svolgimento dell'attività del Presidente Kennedy, non tanto per giudicarne il merito politico, quanto piuttosto per verificare se le promesse morali, contenute in quel solenne primo discorso erano mantenute; e fu per noi, come per tutti quelli che videro in John Kennedy l'uomo nuovo, per la pace e per la prosperità del mondo, motivo di gaudio e di riflessione il sentire il medesimo accento di nobiltà umana nei discorsi, ch'egli via via andò pronunciando: le parole, ad esempio, da lui pronunciate a Berlino, sono un messaggio che la storia deve raccogliere ed il mondo meditare.

Questa capacità di parlare alla società moderna in termini concreti, com'è proprio del genio pratico americano, e con l'ispirazione, che nasce dalla concezione vera dell'umanità, quella di cui la scuola cattolica è custode e maestra, ci sembra costituire la ragione profonda della singolare grandezza del Presidente scomparso: egli ha richiamato la politica, l'economia, la sociologia alle loro sorgenti umane e alle finalità morali; egli ha impresso nella coscienza moderna un'energia, nuova ed antica ad un tempo, quella del bene e dell'amore; egli ha acceso sulla nostra civiltà, caratterizzata dalla conquista del cosmo e delle sue immense risorse, una trascendente speranza; questa non si spegnerà; e

la memoria di John Kennedy vi sarà custodita e illuminata.

Noi lo ricordiamo questo giovane Capo di Stato, modesto e cortese, davanti a noi durante il nostro colloquio; e ancora vediamo il suo volto sereno e virile assorto in pensieri superiori. Guardava lontano, parlava franco e piano, come chi vuole trovare parole vere e esprimere parole buone. Dio, a cui egli non disdegnava elevare la mente e curvare la fronte, avrà raccolto, noi speriamo, il suo grande spirito per la vita eterna; mentre il tragico dramma che troncò quella nobile vita terrena vuol forse avere per tutti questo provvidenziale segreto: occorre raccogliere la sua spirituale eredità e continuare la sua morale missione.

Paulus P.P. VII-