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SUBJECT:

Pope John XXIII

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Enclosed herewith as of possible interest to the Department is a memorandum prepared by Foreign Service Officer Stephen G. Gebelt containing some personal recollections about the recently elected Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope John XXIII.

FOR THE AMBASSADOR:

John Evarts Horner

John Evarts Horner
Counselor of Embassy for Political Affairs

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MEMORANDUM

INTRODUCTION:

1. At the end of World War II, while I was still serving in the Army, assigned as a political officer to the staff of United States forces in France, I established contact with the then auxiliary Archbishop of Paris, Monsignor Beaussart, in order to follow activities within French ecclesiastical circles; I maintained that contact until Archbishop Beaussart died in 1952. During most of that time, Beaussart was the Confessor of the then Papal Nuncio in Paris, Archbishop Roncalli, recently elected Pope John XXIII. They were, in addition, close personal friends. Because of the Nuncio's frequent visits to Monsignor Beaussart, I had occasion to chat with him.
2. In addition, during the period 1948-50, in my capacity as head of the Division for Relations with Governments of the UNESCO Secretariat, I had occasion to see the Nuncio who was accredited by the Vatican as an Observer at UNESCO.
3. Although much of the routine contact was carried on through Monsignor Heim, the Nuncio took a certain interest in UNESCO affairs himself.
4. Roncalli was also an assiduous participant in the social circuit and one saw him frequently at the cocktail hour.
5. My last contact with him was in early 1952.

DISCUSSION:

1. The newly elected Pope served as Papal Nuncio in Istanbul during the war and succeeded Monsignor Valerio Valeri as Papal Nuncio in France in 1945. He arrived at a difficult time in French-Vatican relations, as it was believed by many French circles that the higher French clergy had not been sufficiently vigorous in its resistance to German blandishments; there was also a feeling that Pope Pius XII had been only lukewarm in resisting the Germans and the fact that he was an Italian did nothing to heighten French love for him. General DeGaulle, a devout Catholic himself, was extremely critical of the Vatican and had a particular animosity for Monsignor Valeri. When Archbishop Roncalli arrived in Paris, he appeared to be almost the caricature of a jovial, well-fed and wined 18th Century prelate. Heavy set, speaking French with a strong Italian accent, there was considerable feeling when he first arrived that he would not only be politically inoffensive but probably uninformed.
2. At that period I saw a good deal of the then Turkish Ambassador in Paris, Mr. Menemencioglu, who had served as Turkish Foreign Minister during World War II. I asked him one evening what his opinion was of Roncalli as he had had the opportunity to witness his actions in Turkey during the war. The Ambassador smiled and said; "When Roncalli first arrived in Istanbul we also took note of the fact that he was always at cocktail parties, smiling inanely and apparently unaware of what was going on. It was only at the end of one year that I learned that the only place in Istanbul where I could be sure of finding confirmation of intelligence received ~~received~~ from either the Germans or the Allies was in the office of the Papal Nuncio," and he added; "I have the greatest respect for his ability and I wonder how long it will take him to achieve the same position in France that he enjoyed in Turkey."

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3. My own observations on his actions in France are necessarily limited. He was involved in the difficult problems of the worker-priests, the attempts by the French government to prosecute certain Catholic prelates for war-time collaboration, the disagreement involving the Knights of Malta and the French Freemasons and was an observer in that period during which French communism was at its peak.

4. I gathered the impression of a rather loosely-run Nunciature during his tenure. Considerable freedom of action appeared to have been granted to lesser Monsignori, to the extent that two of them (Monsignor Heim and another whose name I can no longer recall) were transferred, somewhat in disgrace. The Nuncio's contacts were extremely broad and in the conversations I had with him I found his grasp of the French internal political scene excellent.

5. One interesting sidelight is the fact that, on his initiative, the Vatican appointed him as official Observer to UNESCO. This step was long delayed because of the belief in many Vatican circles that UNESCO was a suspect, left-wing, atheistic organization. The appointment of Julian Huxley as the first Director General did nothing to calm Vatican fears, while his successor, Torres Bodet, former Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs and an apostate, did not make those circles any happier. Despite this, Roncalli recommended that the Vatican appoint him Observer and he followed the activities of the Organization with interest.

COMMENT:

1. From my own observations, which are obviously out of date, I would consider the new Pope very different from his predecessor so far as personal temperament is concerned. I would anticipate wider delegation of authorities to the various branches of Church administration.

2. I have noted with some humor that the new Pope is captioned in the various magazine articles about Papal candidates as "non political"; I have never met a more politically aware individual, while more than ten years of service as a Papal Legate and Nuncio seem to me rather political!

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SGGebelt:mkb

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