



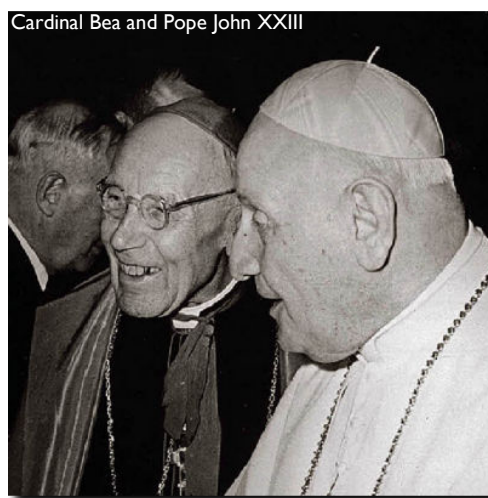
Augustin Bea: Scholar, teacher, cardinal

Oliver P. Rafferty SJ

The Jesuit 2014 calendar focuses on Augustin Cardinal Bea (1881-1968) for the month of May. Oliver Rafferty SJ takes an extended look at the life and achievements of this great biblical scholar and ecumenist, about whom Pope John XXIII said: 'Imagine what a grace the Lord has given in making me discover Cardinal Bea'.

Augustin Bea was one of the most impressive and influential Jesuits that the Society has produced in the 200 year history of the order since its restoration by Pope Pius VII in 1814. Bea was a biblical scholar of international repute, who had been Rector and religious superior of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome (1930-49), and who was also a towering figure at the [Second Vatican Council](#) (1962-65). Such was his impact at the Council that the renowned Dominican theologian Yves Congar could write: 'The Council is Cardinal Bea's Council'. One German Lutheran observer at Vatican II said of him that after [Pope John XXIII](#), Bea 'will live on in the memory of many as the most impressive figure' at the Council. He is perhaps best remembered for the fact that he was the first President of the Secretariat (now the Pontifical Council) for Promoting Christian Unity, from its foundation in 1960 until his death, aged 87, in 1968. His scholarly output was quite simply enormous. In a fifty year period from 1918 he wrote 430 articles covering areas such as biblical archaeology, Old Testament exegesis, Mariology, Christian Unity and anti-sectarianism. Nor did his energies dissipate with age: 260 of his publications appeared in the years from 1960 to 1968, eight of which were full length books.

Born in Riedböhringen in South Baden, a small German village of some 600 inhabitants, Augustin was the only child of Karl and Maria Bea (née Merk). His father was a carpenter and despite his skill the Beas lived in relative poverty, with Augustin's education obtained on the basis of scholarships. An early interest in the Benedictine and Capuchin orders soon gave way to a



desire to become a Jesuit. His father was, however, against the idea, perhaps for two reasons. Bismarck, the Iron Chancellor, had expelled the Jesuits from Germany in 1872; they would not officially return until 1917. This would mean that the young Augustin would have to leave the country to join the order. Furthermore, to become a religious would imply that Bea would not be in a position to give financial support to his parents in their old age. Under his father's influence,

he joined the diocesan seminary at Freiburg-im-Breisgau, his parish priest having to give him a 'certificate of poverty' so that he could study for free. He attended the Catholic faculty of theology at Freiburg University, but by 1902 his parents relented and let him enter the Jesuits at the German novitiate of Blyenbeek in the Netherlands. He was ordained a priest within ten years of joining the order.

Given his outstanding intellectual gifts, Augustin had been sent, while still a scholastic, to take a doctorate in classical philology at Innsbruck. However, the Jesuit General, Fr Franz Xavier Wernz, decided that such specialised studies should only be undertaken after ordination, and so Bea was diverted instead to the theological studies necessary in order to be ordained. By the time he was a priest, his superiors had decided that he should be a biblical scholar rather than a classicist and he was sent to the University of Berlin to study oriental languages and history. These studies were interrupted by the outbreak of World War I, although he had already studied at the Biblical Institute founded in Rome in 1909. In 1914 he was sent to take charge of the Jesuit house at Aachen and from 1917 he taught Old Testa-

ment studies in the German Province theologate at Valkenburg in Holland. By then, with the legal restoration of the order in Germany, the German province had grown to over 1,200 members with a further 350 working in overseas missions. The Jesuit authorities in Rome decided to create a second German Province, Upper Germany, in 1921 and Bea was named as its first provincial superior.

His time as provincial was cut short when he was summoned to Rome by Fr General Włodimir Ledóchowski in 1924 to become Rector of the recently-established Bellarmino, a residence for Jesuit priests doing doctorates in Rome. He was also appointed to teach at the Gregorian University and at the Biblical Institute. Among the most important of his activities in these years was his assignment to Japan, where he was sent by Fr Ledóchowski as the official Visitor to the Jesuit mission for six months in 1929. There he helped to rescue the fortunes of the flagging Sophia University, which had been set up by the Jesuits in Tokyo in 1910 at the specific command of Pope Pius X. It was in severe financial difficulties, but Bea helped to give a new focus to the Jesuit community and assisted in the negotiation of a bank loan from London, for which the English Province of the Society acted as guarantor.

Bea's appointment as Rector of the Biblical Institute (Biblicum) in Rome was accompanied by other duties. From 1931, the year in which he became a consultor to the Biblical Commission, he took over the editorship of the journal *Biblica* a task which he executed with distinction for 20 years. He drafted Pope Pius XI's constitution *Deus scientiarum Dominus* (1931), which reformed higher ecclesiastical studies for the clergy. He persuaded the pope to allow himself and several other Jesuits to attend a meeting of Old Testament exegetes – mostly Protestant, Jewish and secular scholars – at Göttingen in 1935. Bea's powers of persuasion were quite a coup in those pre-ecumenical days, especially given that the Holy Office had issued an edict a few years earlier specifically forbidding Catholics to take part in such meetings. Such was the impression Bea made on the scholars at that conference that he was asked to chair the final session.

Bea involved himself in all aspects of the Biblical Institute's work. He visited the Institute's branch in Jerusalem on several occasions and in 1936-37 he took part in an archaeological dig at Tulaylāt al-Ghassûl in the Jor-

dan valley, near the Dead Sea. These excavations gave rise to the finding of a lost culture that had flourished around 3800 – 3350 BC and which is today referred to as Ghassulian. Bea was also instrumental in setting up the Oriental Institute (not to be confused with the Orientale) at the Biblicum, which studies the languages, archaeology and cultures of the ancient near east.

Another important phase of Bea's life coincided with the pontificate of Pius XII (1939-58). He assisted in drafting the papal encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943), which allowed Catholic scholars to make use of critical techniques in the study of scripture and encouraged the study of ancient biblical languages. He was also appointed to a Vatican committee examining further reforms of the liturgy following Pius XII's encyclical *Mediator Dei* (1947), although it must be said he was not an innovator in this field. He also served as an adviser to the Holy Office which, a few months after his appointment, formally gave permission for Catholic scholars to attend theological conferences with non-Catholic scholars. He was an adviser to the commission which worked on the Declaration of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1950, the same year in which he was appointed as a consultor to the Congregation of Rites. From 1945 he was also the confessor to the pope and his largely German household.

Bea was not an unreconstructed 'liberal'. When Cardinal Emmanuel Suhard, Archbishop of Paris, asked Pope Pius XII to set aside the 1911 judgment of the Biblical Commission on the chronology and historicity of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, Bea advised the pope merely to elaborate on the judgment rather than abandon it, so as not to relativise the value of previous Vatican pronouncements. He also wrote in defence of *Humani generis* (1950), although that encyclical was aimed, in part, against the 'new theology' which was then emanating from France and Germany. Bea had, however, following the Second World War, kept in close contact with the developing ecumenism in Germany between Catholics and Protestants, and with similar movements in Switzerland and France, but in particular with Mgr Johannes Willebrands in the Netherlands and his Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions.

Bea's work for the Holy See in the 1940s became so demanding that he asked to be relieved of the Rectorship of the Biblicum. In recognition of his labours, Pius XII had decided to make Bea a cardinal in 1953. How-

ever, the intervention of Fr General Jean-Baptiste Janssens, arguing that such a move was contrary to Jesuit vows and would also provoke hostility to the Society - which, Janssens rightly thought, already had too much influence with the Holy See - brought the proposal to a halt. Recognition came from other quarters. The government of the Federal Republic of Germany awarded Bea the Grand Cross of Merit in 1954, of which he quipped that it was not the heaviest cross he had to bear. Two years earlier he had been made an honorary fellow of the Society for Old Testament Studies, whose conference he organised at the Biblicum that year. He also arranged for participants at that conference to meet with Pope Pius XII, significant for the fact that most of them were not Catholics.

The proposal to set up a Vatican department to advance Christian unity had first been suggested by the Greek Catholic Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV in May 1959, and the suggestion was taken up by the German archbishop Lorenz Jäger of Paderborn on the basis of a paper that Bea had prepared. Not everyone welcomed Bea's appointment as head of that department; some reservation was expressed because he had been so closely associated with the 'conservative' Pius XII. However, he was to become equally influential in the papacy of Pope John XXIII.

The first extended meeting between Bea and Pope John XXIII had taken place on 9 January 1959; by November of that year, Bea had been made a cardinal. Fr Janssens had once more objected to this appointment, largely for the same reasons he offered against the elevation in 1953. This time, however, Cardinal Domenico Tardini of the Vatican's Secretariat of State told the General that there was a 'categorical order' from the pope for Bea's proposed dignity. On 20 April 1963, just two months before his death, Pope John XXIII told Dr Vittorino Veronese, the Director General of UNESCO: 'Imagine what a grace the Lord has given in making me discover Cardinal Bea'. Bea himself remarked that he and Pope John 'understood each other perfectly'.

It was Bea who first suggested that non-Catholic observers should be invited to the Second Vatican Council: in the end 60 observers would attend. One of the leading American Protestant participants, Robert McAfee Brown, said that Bea's spirit 'endeared him to the Protestant world'. Given his position, Bea was the principle architect of the Decree on Ecumenism. His

remit, however, went well beyond this. It was he who was charged with drawing up the declaration on the Jews, which eventually evolved into the Decree *Nostra aetate* on the relationship between Catholicism and non-Christian religions as a whole.

In general, Bea's Vatican department acted as a counter-weight to the central Preparatory Commission for Vatican II, which was headed by the arch-conservative Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani. Being a Roman insider, Bea knew what was possible and what could not be done. On some issues he made compromises. Although responsible for overseeing the historic visit to Rome of Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher of Canterbury in December 1960, he accepted the restrictions imposed on that visit by the Secretariat of State, even to the extent of forbidding photographs. When Bea proposed that the Vatican should send observers to the third General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi in 1961, he again bent to the wishes of Cardinal Ottaviani, who would only agree provided that the observers did not come from the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

Bea's interventions at the Council covered areas such as the Liturgy, *Divine Revelation*, the Church, and the *Church in the Modern World*: in fact, in all but four of the Council's sixteen documents, Bea intervened either with speeches or with written suggestions. It is said that his influence waned somewhat in the pontificate of Paul VI; nevertheless, the pope visited him in hospital just before his death. At his own request he is buried alongside his parents, since, as he observed when he made this unusual request to the Holy See, there are many cardinals buried in Rome but none in Riedböhringen. Now there is one.

Oliver P. Rafferty SJ is a historian. His most recent book is the edited collection Irish Catholic Identities (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

To purchase a copy of the 2014 calendar, and to find out more about Cardinal Bea and the other Jesuits featured, please visit:

www.jesuit.org.uk/calendar2014

Further reading:

Stjepan Schmidt, *Augustin Bea: The Cardinal of Unity* (New York: New York City Press, 1992).

Stjepan Schmidt (ed.), *Augustin Cardinal Bea: Spiritual Profile: Notes from the Cardinal's Diary with Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1971).

Jerome-Michael Verber, "Because he was German" *Cardinal Bea and the Origins of Roman Catholic Engagement in the Ecumenical Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

Giuseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II* (E.T.) (New York: Orbis Books, 2006).

Robert McAfee Brown, *Observer in Rome: A Protestant Report on the Vatican Council* (New York: Doubleday, 1964).

Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council* (E.T.) (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012).