

Coronation Tiara of Pope Paul VI

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When the persecutors of deacon Lawrence (A.D. c.225-258) ordered him to surrender the riches of the Church, he returned with a host of poor people—the poor, crippled, blind and suffering—and said, “These are the true treasures of the Church.” For this reply, Lawrence was martyred. Many centuries later, another resident of Rome would surrender the symbol of pontifical dignity, and, yes, even wealth, in a symbolic and humble act of concern for the “true treasures of the Church.” Over the years, many stories have surrounded this tiara, the only one of its kind displayed outside of the Vatican. The truth, however, exceeds the fiction and



Icon of St. Lawrence

Byzantine Chapel

begins more than twenty years earlier. The following is a brief account of the people and events leading to that historic event of 1964.

In the months and years following World War II, the lives of two men—a layman and a clergyman—became forever joined by faith and a concern for the poor. James J. Norris (1907-1976) and Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini (1897-1978), met for the first time at the Vatican in 1946. At that time Norris was special assistant to Monsignor Patrick A. O’Boyle (later cardinal archbishop of Washington, D.C.) executive director of the War Relief Services (WRS). Montini was under-secretary in the Vatican Secretariat of State and was personally responsible for handling the humanitarian and relief efforts of Pope Pius XII. Montini and Norris met privately with the Pope on August 17, 1946. At this time, it was agreed that WRS would work with the Holy See to 1) feed and clothe millions of people in a war-ravaged Europe, 2) assist in the immigration of countless displaced persons, more than half of whom were Catholic, and 3) establish a Catholic commission to aid refugees. For the next five years, Norris devised programs, rallied funds, and navigated the politics of both Church and State on both sides of the ocean. In 1951, the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) of Pope Pius XII was inaugurated. Norris was the first president and served in that capacity for more than two decades. The Holy Father introduced the Commission to the world through the promulgation of his Apostolic Constitution, *Exsul Familia* (Aug 1, 1952,) which also underscored his personal concern for refugees and migrants.

Even after these successful efforts, large numbers of poor and dispossessed populated the world. Norris felt that more was needed: a pontifical secretariat on poverty. Norris was not a passive participant when it came to the Gospel and the Church. Like the sower in the Gospel of Matthew (13:1-9), Norris, with the support and encouragement of now Cardinal Montini, went about planting the seeds of care for the poor from the colonnades of Bernini, to the United Nations, to the White House.



Tiara of Pope Paul VI



1963, Norris, Pope Paul VI, Lay Auditors

Appointed a lay auditor to the Ecumenical Vatican Council II in 1963 by his old friend Montini, now Pope Paul VI (1963-1978), Norris continued his efforts and lobbied for a “world poverty day” at the Council. During the Second Session (Sept 29 – Dec 4, 1963) the issue of world poverty was addressed by at least twenty-seven bishops, who would later meet with those of a similar mind to devise a way to urge the Council to action. During the summer of 1964, Léon Joseph Cardinal Suenens of Belgium, asked Barbara Ward, a well-respected Catholic British economist, to write a memorandum on “World Poverty and the Christian Conscience.” A copy reached Norris; he had found a kindred spirit. The memorandum supported his efforts “for some kind of attention-getting action on the part of the bishops.” Norris went into high gear and began preparing a proposal for a “poverty day” at Vatican II. He wanted “the poverty-stricken people of the world” to be aware of “the Church’s intense interest in them” (Norris Proposal, Oct 7, 1964). Part of his plan included a presentation at the Council by an “expert layperson,” namely, Barbara Ward.

The proposal generated substantial interest and support among the bishops, including a promise for a “world poverty day” at the third session, which began in September and would conclude in November. It was now October, if “world poverty day” was to happen, the Holy Father needed to see the proposal immediately. Knowing the workings of the Vatican, Norris, with the help of Albert Cardinal Meyers of Chicago, engaged the assistance of Franz Cardinal König of Vienna, who was scheduled for a private audience with the Holy Father. König agreed to place the proposal in the hands of Pope Paul VI. After the audience, König wrote to Norris and Meyer that the Holy Father agreed to the intervention by a “lay expert” but insisted that Norris be the one to address the Council. On October 31, Norris was advised to prepare a text in Latin that was to be submitted to the Council Secretariat on November 2 for presentation at the Council. The clock was ticking.

On November 5, at the 115th General Congregation of the Council, Norris addressed the Council at 11:30 a.m. Speaking in excellent, articulate Latin, Norris began with an amusing digression, asking the Council fathers to “excuse” him for speaking “in an ancient tongue about modern problems.” He then began his prepared address (*Relatio*) that introduced the debate “Concerning World Poverty, Schema on the Church in the Modern World” (*De Paupertate Mundial en Schemate de Ecclesia in Mundo Huius Temporis*, chapter 4, § 24). As Norris later stated, the talk was “essentially material that [Barbara Ward] had written.” The first seven paragraphs were almost verbatim, minus the statistical information. The remainder of the intervention was based on his personal experiences. Norris stipulated the need for development, not charity and delineated the ways in which poverty leads to social and spiritual ills. He quoted Pope Paul VI, who regarded “hunger as the principal problem in the world today” (Christmas Message, 1963) and stated that a “living human family does not permit its members to suffer in this way.” Norris concluded his address by challenging the bishops of the world, “that from this ecumenical



Norris and his wife Amanda in the Basilica of Saint Peter, 1964

council there comes a clarion call for action ... to secure full Catholic participation in the world-wide attack on poverty.”

The fourteen-minute talk was enthusiastically received. It was quite a morning for the American Church; it was quite a morning for Norris. In New York City, Chet Huntley of *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* (1956–1970) gave prime time coverage to the intervention, emphasizing that Norris spoke in fluent Latin—one of seven languages in which the diplomat was conversant. Messages of support and congratulations poured in from around the world. The message most treasured was the hand-written note from Pope Paul VI, in which the Holy Father thanked “Jim,” “for his beautiful Christian testimony.”

One week later, on the feast of Saint John Chrysostom (Nov 13), the bishops gathered for the closing of the third session. To underscore the need for unity between Catholics of the East and West, the Divine Liturgy of the Byzantine Rite was celebrated. At the end of the service, Archbishop Pericle Felici, the Council Secretary, read a statement on behalf of the Holy Father: “The Roman Catholic Church has always shown its charity toward the poor. ... Pope Paul VI has wanted to give new proof of this charity.” So it happened that after hearing “the many and grave words expressed in the council on the misery and hunger of these days” the Holy Father decided to give away his crown. Then, in a moment teeming with Christian love and humility, Pope Paul VI rose from his throne, walked towards the main altar, and

placed his tiara on the altar in the midst of the bishops of the world, as a symbolic gesture on behalf of the universal Church, for the poor of the world. As the Pope left the sanctuary, the church and the Church responded with applause and cheers: “*Viva il Papa Povero!*” (Long live the Pope of Poverty!) It was later stated that Pope Paul VI did not renounce the use of the tiara, as there were other tiaras available. Still, from that day on, Pope Paul VI never wore a tiara but rather, a mitre; a practice that his successors have *chosen* to continue.

Norris wrote to his old friend, thanking him “for the beautiful letter ... on the occasion of my talk on World Poverty to the Council Fathers.”



November 13, 1964, Pope Paul VI donating his tiara.

He assured the Holy Father that “Your beautiful gesture of giving your tiara for the poor of the world is sure to have not only symbolic effects, but will have many long range effects in Your efforts to make our Catholic people aware of the serious and grave problems of poverty and hunger in the world” (Nov 23, 1964).

The allocation of the tiara has often been fictionalized. The following is the journey of this ecclesiastical ornament from the Vatican to the National Shrine in Washington, D.C.

On November 18, 1964, the disposition of the tiara was made known in a letter from Francis Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York, to Pope Paul VI. “I am deeply grateful to your Holiness for the precious gift of your tiara, which I humbly accept as a tribute to the charity of Americans and as an evidence of the desire of assisting your Holiness in helping the poor of the world. ... This tiara will be treasured as ... a symbol of the merciful heart of Your Holiness.” (Since the end of World War II, the Catholic Church in America had donated \$1.3 billion—approximately \$10 billion in 2015 dollars—to the poor. The National Shrine contributes annually to the Holy Father’s work with the poor.)



1957, Third ICMC Congress, Assisi, Italy

The tiara made its American début in New York City at Saint Patrick’s Cathedral and then at the 1964-1965 New York World’s Fair, displayed in the Vatican Pavilion near the *Pietà* of Michelangelo. From 1964 to 1968, every diocese and archdiocese, every charitable organization that requested permission, displayed the tiara, helping to raise donations for the poor of the world. Finally, on



February 6, 1968, Archbishop Luigi Raimondi, Apostolic Delegate to the United States, presented the tiara to the National Shrine, its final home, which had been determined from the beginning. (Paul VI was quite familiar with the National Shrine, having visited June 9, 1960, as the Cardinal-Archbishop of Milan; Norris attended daily Mass in the Crypt Church in the 1930s while a student at CUA, he later served on the Shrine’s Board of Trustees, 1968-1976).

The Apostolic Delegate spoke of the “sense of deep emotion and keen awareness” he felt as a representative of Pope Paul VI, presenting “the tiara which the Holy Father wore at [his] coronation on June 30, 1963.” The Archbishop then recounted how he, “Together with more than two thousand bishops and other dignitaries ... witnessed the humble gesture of His Holiness when ... he descended the steps of the papal throne and placed the tiara on the altar. Everyone present sensed the historical importance of the act. The tiara, which has been the symbol of pontifical dignity, became the new spirit of the Church purified. It manifested the renunciation of human glory and power. It will remain forever a reminder that the energy and resources of the Church must be employed for the good of souls and the betterment of individuals.”

In the years that followed Vatican II, the *Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace*, the “name is also its program,” met for the first time in 1967. The *Pontifical Council Cor Unum*, “one heart ... that beats in rhythm with the heart of Christ, whose pity for the hungry multitudes reaches them even in their spiritual hunger,” met for the first time in 1972. Norris was a charter member of both councils.

“Keep holding high the torch of charity that tells our brothers in need that we stand, in love, at his side.” (1975, Norris acceptance speech, U.N. Nansen Medal.) ☚



Bust of James J. Norris, Memorial Hall