This weekend, Pope Paul VI will be canonized a saint in the Catholic Church. Although he was pope during one of the most significant moments of modern Church history, Pope Paul is mostly recalled today as a figure of great suffering, and his 15-year papacy in terms of the disastrous period in the Church that it coincided with. Nevertheless, those who knew him personally bore witness to his great personal holiness, and revealed the great suffering the Holy Father took upon himself due to his great love for the Church.

Giovanni Battista Montini was born in 1897 to middle-class Italian parents. A bright student, Giovanni recognized a call to the priesthood early on, and entered seminary before he turned twenty. His superiors recognized his talents, and after his ordination had him continue his education rather than being assigned to a parish (in fact, he would never be assigned to a parish for his entire priesthood!). He was only twenty-five years old when he was appointed to work for the Vatican Secretariat of State, where he began a lifetime of honing diplomatic skills and creating relationships with many of the most influential figures in the Church. None would be more important to him than that of Cardinal Pacelli, the Secretary of State who headed his office. Pacelli was impressed with young Fr. Montini, and mentored him. Cardinal Pacelli was elected pope in 1938, taking the name Pius XII. Pope Pius continued to entrust Montini with more and more responsibilities over time.

In 1954, Pius named Montini the archbishop of Milan. He gained a reputation for openness to dialogue with people of other faiths or even of no religion at all, and a bishop who was unafraid to try out new concepts in order to reach new groups of people or reinvigorate the faith of Christians where it was waning. Pope Pius wanted to name him a cardinal, but Montini declined the honor, and the pope respected his wishes.

This was not the case in 1958, however, when a new pope sat on the throne of Peter. Pope St. John XXIII, who had also been friends with Montini prior to his election, named Montini a cardinal. He also shocked the Church that same year by announcing his plans to convene an ecumenical council to set the agenda for a bold new pastoral plan for the entire Church in the modern world. This Second Vatican Council (or ‘Vatican II’ as it came to be known) would be the largest such council in the whole history of the Church. As progressive as Montini had been with his own pastoral planning, he too was taken aback by the scale of Pope John’s ambition in terms of the council: “This holy old boy doesn’t realize what a hornet’s nest he’s stirring up,” he wrote.

After several years of planning, Vatican II finally got off the ground in 1962. It completed its preliminary session that fall, with plans for the bishops to go home to their dioceses and then reconvene the following year to pick up where they left off. However, Pope John died of cancer during that interim period, meaning that the next pope could have abandoned the council entirely if they were not as committed to it as he had been. But the next pope was in fact determined to see Vatican II succeed, even if he had believed it to be stirring up a hornet’s nest: Cardinal Montini was elected pope in June of 1963. He took the name ‘Paul’, the sixth pope in history to do so, stating that he wished to be a great Christian evangelizer as St. Paul the apostle had been.

Pope Paul made it his top priority to see the Second Vatican Council to its conclusion, which he did. Vatican II concluded its work three years after his election, and Paul VI believed that it’s spiritual fruit would be a great and renewed energy throughout the Catholic Church, which would then spill out into a modern world badly in need of God’s grace. Within five years of the council’s conclusion, however, it seemed that nothing could have been further from the truth. Great confusion reigned in the lives of ordinary Catholics, who struggled to adapt to the changes Vatican II had brought to what had been for them a very comfortable familiarity with what ‘being Catholic’ meant. In Europe and the United States, especially, the fact that Vatican II had coincided with a
decade of great social upheaval in the 1960s meant that many Catholics believed that the Church should also have changed many of its core teachings, not just its pastoral planning as the council had determined. In the light of the new anti-authoritarian air in the culture, many Catholics began to simply ignore what the Church actually taught and live how they wanted—while still considering themselves Catholic.

This confusion and dissent was not limited to the pews, however. Previously-packed seminaries were suddenly emptied out. Many priests left the priesthood altogether, and convents and monasteries lost many adherents as well. As traditional ways of practicing devotions were now being portrayed as outdated, many faithful Catholics found themselves suffering isolation or even persecution within their own Church. Less than ten years after Vatican II had concluded, Pope Paul said in a sermon that it was clear that “from some fissure the smoke of Satan has entered the temple of God... There was the belief that after the Council there would be a sunshine for the history of the Church. Instead, it is the arrival of a days of clouds, of [storms], of darkness... of uncertainty.”

Perhaps no moment in Pope Paul’s reign crystallized that fact more than his 1968 encyclical Humanae Vitae, in which he reaffirmed the Church’s doctrine that artificial birth control could never be used by Christians to prevent conception, even in marriage. Though this had been the Church’s teaching for 2,000 years, Pope Paul was stunned at the negative reaction of many in the Church to this teaching. Even some priests publicly denounced Paul in the press and began circulated petitions to openly reject this doctrine.

Paul VI, who loved the Church very deeply, suffered great personal stress and anxiety as a consequence of all this. “From the first day of his pontificate,” one papal biographer wrote, “the papacy was a Calvary for him.” One bishop remarked to the Holy Father that it was fitting that he had chosen ‘Paul’ for his name, since he truly was ‘crucified with Christ’ as St. Paul had written of himself in the New Testament. The pope said in response, “every night about midnight I open my mail of the day. Almost every letter has a thorn in it. When I put my head down on my pillow at night, I really lay it on a crown of thorns... But I cannot tell you what an ineffable joy it is to suffer all this for the sake of the Church.”

It is unfortunate that, though they are usually overshadowed by the spiritual collapse that was visible in many parts of the Church during his reign, Pope Paul actually had many successes. He lived up to the promise of his papal name in undertaking many trips away from Rome to bring the Gospel to other areas of the globe. Pope Paul was the first pope in history to visit six different continents, including becoming the first pope ever to visit the United States and to address the United Nations assembly in speaking out against war. Several of his encyclicals were influential, with Humanae Vitae especially standing out as prophetic in accurately predicting the disaster that would follow in all societies which would embrace artificial contraception as a norm. His emphasis on evangelization continues to bear fruit in the Church even today, and some of the men he created cardinals at the time now stand as giants in our time: both Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI were 'given the red hat' by Paul VI during his reign.

Ultimately, Pope Paul is today remembered as a very holy man who very much struggled to meet the challenges of his time as a leader. He did not have a strong public persona or a personal magnetism as John Paul or Francis have displayed. He was also not a man who would dictatorially impose his will on those who disagreed with him, which encouraged dissenters to take advantage of the more permissive culture in the Church following Vatican II. But throughout all of this, Paul VI continued to submit everything to God in prayer and to unite his great sufferings to Christ, trusting that somehow, God would ultimately be the one responsible for the renewal of the Church that he had so dreamed of but would never see become a reality. In that, his canonization provides us with a timely reminder that when we are called to serve the Church during a time of great spiritual crisis, our prayers, our continued efforts, and our sufferings truly can help God to provide the foundation for renewal yet to come.