

Faith Alive!

Reflections on Spirituality and Spiritual Life

Saint Pope John XXIII

“To the entire world Pope John has given what neither diplomacy nor science could give: a sense of the unity of the human family.” Time Magazine, December 31, 1962

Saint Pope John XXIII, born Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, lived for 81½ years, 59 as a priest, 38 as a bishop, and less than five years as the 259th Pope. Despite the brief duration of his reign, he orchestrated vast changes that brought the Roman Catholic Church into the modern world. He was not only a remarkable prelate, but also one of the most beloved figures of the 20th century. The many books and articles about Pope John XXIII, and especially his own writings, reveal a man of great humility, simplicity, compassion, conviction, intelligence, and humor.

He was born in Sotto il Monte, Italy, in the diocese of Bergamo, on November 25, 1881, to Battista and Marianne Giulia (Mazzola) Roncalli, the first son and the fourth of thirteen children. His was a large extended deeply religious family whose ancestors for generations worked as sharecroppers, eking out a living tilling the hard soil and tending to a few cows and pigs. He said of that time: “We were poor, but happy with our lot and confident in the help of Providence” (Hebblethwaite, 2000).

Roncalli’s education began with the family’s active prayer life and celebrations of religious feasts. His great-uncle Zaverio, the family patriarch, was his godfather and the guider of his early religious education. In elementary school, his classmates named him Angelo, the “little priest,” and he said that he could not remember a time when he did not want to be a priest.

In 1892, he entered the diocesan minor seminary of Bergamo. It was there that he began the *Journal of a Soul*, the diary of quotations and spiritual notes about the state of his soul that he kept throughout his life.

During his first year of novitiate, on March 1, 1896, Roncalli received the habit of the Franciscan Third Order. He received tonsure the same year. Years later, Pope John XXIII recalled that day, telling Franciscans on the 750th anniversary of the pontifical approval of the Franciscan rule, “I am Joseph, your brother. Franciscan tertiary and cleric on the way to the priesthood, received with the same cords of simplicity—unconscious and happy—that would accompany us all the way to the blessed altar and would give us everything in life” (Benigni & Zanchi, 2000). In 1901, he continued his studies in Rome at the Pontifical Seminary. In journal entries from that time he speaks of his struggle with feelings of inadequacy, his tendency to become distracted, and his outspokenness. His studies were interrupted for a year of volunteer service in the Italian army. On Holy Saturday, April 11, 1903, Roncalli was ordained a subdeacon in the Basilica of St. John Lateran, and named Don Angelo Roncalli, and ordained a deacon on December 28. He was ordained to the priesthood on August 10, 1904.

In October 1904, Don Roncalli began his studies in canon law and was named secretary to the new Bishop of Bergamo, Giacomo Maria Radini-Tedeschi, who would become a mentor and a great influence in the young deacon’s life. He

traveled widely with Bishop Tedeschi during his nine years of service and participated as a collaborator in management activities. Roncalli also taught seminary courses during these years and was regarded as an elegant and effective preacher.

Because the clergy were not exempt from military service, Roncalli was drafted into the army on May 24, 1915, as Italy entered World War I, serving as a sergeant in the medical corps in Bergamo. There he heard confessions, anointed the dying, and comforted those he called his “poor soldiers.” After he completed his military service on December 10, 1918, Pope Benedict XV asked him to make arrangements for the 1920 Eucharistic Congress at Bergamo. A year later he was appointed director of the Italian Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

In 1925 Pope Pius XI appointed Roncalli apostolic visitor in Bulgaria, and he was consecrated bishop on March 19. That began a thirty-year diplomatic career that took him all over Europe. As apostolic delegate to Turkey and Greece, he was a leader for both Latin-rite and Eastern-rite Catholics, using his charm and diplomatic skills to make friends and allies of antireligious governments.

In 1944, following the liberation of France, Pope Pius XII appointed Bishop Roncalli papal nuncio in France. He worked skillfully to repair the many political and religious divisions in the country, using his skill as a lively conversationalist and host to win factions over. He could be seen at receptions holding a glass of champagne and smoking a cigarette. Though friendly, charming, and approachable, Roncalli never lacked decisiveness and firmness of character.

On January 12, 1953, he was made a cardinal, and appointed Patriarch of Venice on March 15, at the age of 71. At the prospect of being a cardinal, Roncalli said

he did not relish being in Rome where his life would be management and meetings, saying, “That means nothing to me. I am a pastor” (Feldman, 2000). The Venetians loved him, and his efforts to cultivate the wealthy people of the city resulted in the addition of new parishes and a minor seminary, construction of an opera, a theater, a cultural center, and an orphanage—all of which created jobs for the poor. He opened the patriarch’s palace to world-famous artists and musicians and traveled about the city by public water bus, engaging common people in conversation.

Upon the death of Pope Pius XII on October 9, 1958, the 51 cardinals at the conclave elected Cardinal Roncalli Pope on the eleventh ballot. He was considered a compromise candidate who, because of his age, would not reign long. He chose the name John XXIII, a name that had been previously selected by the antipope in Avignon, a heretic and murderer. He chose the name, he explained, for his father, Giovanni; for the name of his baptismal parish; and for the two men closest to Jesus, the Apostle John and John the Baptist. But most importantly, as he told the cardinals, he had chosen the name to renew the words of the Apostle John: “My children, love one another” (*Vent’Anni*, as cited in Hepplethwaite, 2000). At his coronation Mass, he repeated the reference to Joseph that he had made before: “The new Pope, through the events and circumstances of his life, is like the son of Jacob who, meeting with all his brothers, burst into tears and said, ‘I am Joseph, your brother’” (Genesis 45.4) (*Vent’Anni*, as cited in Hepplethwaite, 2000). The coronation ceremony was attended by Pope John’s many relatives, who broke into tears frequently. Displaying his sense of humor, his response to the tears was, “Come on now, what they’ve done to me isn’t *so* bad” (Cahill, 2002). On Christmas Day he left the Vatican to visit children hospitalized with polio. Because of his girth and the fact that he brought many

gifts, they thought he was *Babbo Natale* (Father Christmas), which he thought that was fine. The day after, he visited Regina Coeli Prison, telling the prisoners of his own humble beginnings and past mistakes, and reminding them that we are all children of God. He repeated the words he had spoken at his coronation: “I am Joseph, your brother.” The prisoners openly wept.

His Apostolic Letter, *Humanae Salutis*, on Christmas 1961, announced the convocation of the Second Vatican Council, which opened on October 11, 1962, amid color and pageantry. This marked the first ecumenical council called since 1870 and only the twenty-first in the Church’s 2,000-year history. He called it, he said, to bring “a new Pentecost” in the life of the Church. On October 4, the feast of St. Francis, Pope John made one last pilgrimage to Loreto and Assisi (the first by a Pope since 1870) to invoke the Virgin Mary’s protection over the Council. He told the congregation there that the Church must once again be a “Church of the poor,” as it was for *il Poverello* Francis, the patron of Italy.

On Holy Thursday, April 11, 1963, he issued the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, written in his own words for all men and women and ending with a plea to end the arms race and eradicate nuclear weapons. He wrote a total of eight encyclicals during his reign, six between 1959 and 1962.

In 1963 medical tests revealed that Pope John had terminal stomach cancer and he was given a year to live. As he had always done, he accepted God’s will, using the language of St. Francis: “I await the arrival of Sister Death.” As his health deteriorated, people from all over the world prayed for him and honored him. He received the Balzan Peace Prize (with Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s approval), was named *Time* Magazine’s Man of the Year for 1963, and was selected for the US Presidential Medal

of Honor, which was awarded posthumously.

On June 3, a Mass for the sick bishop of Rome was said in St. Peter’s Square. From his deathbed, Pope John was able to hear the Mass on the speakers. At the words of dismissal, “*Ite missa est*, (the Mass is ended),” he breathed his last breath. Pope John XXIII was beatified on September 3, 2000. His body was exhumed in 2001 and found to be perfectly preserved. It was displayed in St. Peter’s Square on the thirty-eighth anniversary of his death. His tomb is under the altar of St. Jerome in St. Peter’s Basilica.

Saint Pope John XXIII brought the Church into a new era. With a lifetime that spanned two world wars, he always sought to stress what unites rather than divides mankind. He worked to achieve the rights of all people to life and freedom, and the cooperation of all nations in bringing about world peace. At the Novena of Prayer for the Pope of the Council, as Pope John lay dying, Cardinal Montini, the future Pope Paul VI, captured the essence of his legacy: “Perhaps never before in our time has the human word—the word of a master, a leader, a prophet, a pope—rung out so loudly and won such affection throughout the whole world” (*Ite Missa Est*, as cited in Hebblethwaite, 2000).

By Kathleen Gilmour



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Feast Day for Saint Pope John XXIII

October 11th

This is the date of the first session of the Second Vatican Council and is now the feast day for this Saint.

Prayers of Saint Pope John XXIII

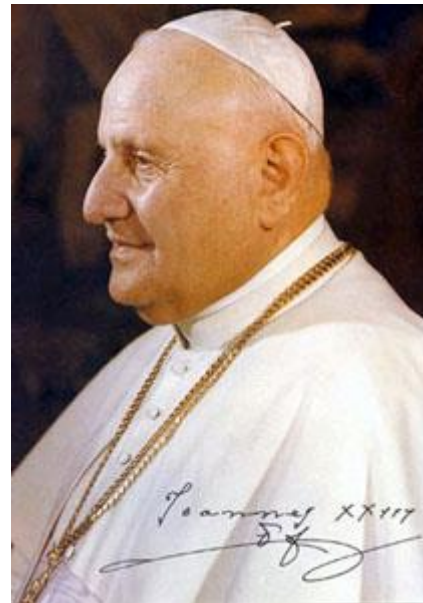
Consult not your fears
but your hopes and your dreams.
Think not about your frustrations,
but about your unfulfilled potential.
Concern yourself not with what you
tried and failed in,
but with what it is still possible
for you to do.

Give me Strength for this Day

To get through life I know I need You close to me O Lord, but today I need You closer than ever, I need Your strength to face whatever is to come.

This day, I need to feel You very near to me...to give me courage and help to overcome my fear. By myself I cannot meet the challenge of this day, today I need a Higher Power sustaining me in all that it may bring.

Dear Lord, hold my trembling hand and be with me this day. To know You are holding my hand, is all I need to know. Just to know Your Blessed Presence is near.



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