



Pope Saint John XXIII

Biography Timeline: **November 25, 1881**, born Angelo Giuseppe, son of Battista Roncalli and Marianna Mazzola, fourth of 14 children in a peasant family in the northern Italian village of Sotto il Monte near Bergamo; **1888**, first communion (unusual for a boy of seven); **1892-1895**, eager seminarian at Bergamo and at the Seminario Romano; begins writing spiritual notes, a practice he continues until his death, **1896** is admitted to Secular Franciscan Order; **May 23, 1897**, makes profession of Secular Franciscan Order's Rule of life; **1901**, attains degree in theology; **1904**, attains doctorate in theology; **August 10, 1904**, is ordained a priest in church of Santa Maria in Monte Santo in Rome; **1905**, is appointed secretary to Bishop of Bergamo; **1915**, serves in the military during World War I, first in the medical corps and later as a chaplain; **1919**, made spiritual director at the Seminario Romano; **1921**, is appointed by Pope Benedict XV to be the Italian president of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome; **March 19, 1925**, made archbishop and appointed by Pope Pius XI to be Apostolic Visitor in Bulgaria; takes as his Episcopal motto "*Oboedientia et Pax*" ("Obedience and Peace"); **1935**, serves as a papal representative in Turkey and Greece; when World War II breaks, out attempts to get news from POW's to their families and assists many Jews to escape by issuing "transit visas"; **1944**, named Papal Nuncio to France; **January 12, 1953**, made a cardinal and Patriarch of Venice; **October 28, 1958**, elected Pope (on the seventh ballot), understood as a "compromise" candidate; takes the name John XXIII; expresses a love of people and his obvious humanity and begins to display a new approach to ecclesiastical matters; becomes known popularly as "Good Pope John;" **1960**, establishes the Secretariat for Christian Unity; **December 25, 1961**, issues Apostolic Letter *Humanae salutis*; **October 11, 1962**, convenes the Second Vatican Council with the announced purpose of "the spiritual renewal of the Church and reconsideration of its role in the modern world;" extends unprecedented invitations to Protestant and Eastern Orthodox churches, and Jewish representatives to send observers; Vatican II advocates the reformation of the liturgy with an eye toward bringing the laity into closer participation in church services, and great emphasis is also placed on the pastoral duties of bishops, as distinguished from administrative duties; the phrase "*perfidious Jews*" is edited out of the Good Friday liturgy; **September 1962**, diagnosed with gastric carcinoma; **1963**, awarded the International Peace Prize of the Eugenio Balzan Foundation; **April 11, 1963**, Maundy Thursday, issues encyclical *Pacem in terris*; **June 3, 1963**, dies at the age of eighty-one, his last words being "*My time on earth is drawing to a close. But Christ lives on and continues his work in the Church. Souls, souls, Ut omnes unum sint (that all may be one)*"; **June 6, 1963**, is buried in Rome; collections of Pope John XXIII's spiritual notes published as *Journal a Soul*; **September 3, 2000**, is declared "Blessed" by Pope John Paul II, the third ("beatification") step on the road to sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church; **June 3, 2013**, Pope Francis visits his tomb on the 50th anniversary of his death; **July 3, 2013**, Pope Francis approves him for canonization; **April 27, 2014**, is declared a saint in the Roman Catholic Church.

"Good Pope John," they called him. From humble peasants to pompous pedants, Pope John XXIII placed an indelible mark on the Catholic Church unlike any other Pope in the 20th century or since. In doing so, he also left the rest of the world, like the Roman Catholic Church, awe-struck and changed forever.

There was about Pope John XXIII a celebration of universality. Not very many people saw this coming when he was elected Pope. But had they known him throughout his life they would have understood why it was so crucial to declare in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* his hopes for "*universal peace in truth, justice, charity, and*

liberty."(1) The roly poly man whom many may have discounted as a "place holder" turned out to have an immense heart of love for his Church and for the world.

His heart had been nurtured in such universal love in the town and the congregation of his upbringing. In the humble hamlet of Sotto il Monte, Angelo Roncali (Pope John XXIII's given name) frequently saw the words of St. Bernard whenever he entered the presbytery of the hometown priest, Father Francesco Rebuzzini.

*Peace within the cell: fierce warfare without.
Hear all; believe a few; honour all.
Do not believe everything you hear;
Do not judge everything you see;
Do not do everything you can;
Do not give everything you have;
Do not say everything you know.
Pray, read, withdraw, be silent, be at peace. (2)*

His loving heart had been enlarged and made even more compassionate by the crucibles of two World Wars. His special initiatives in Turkey and Greece and later in France during World War II, revealed his heart of universal love, especially for the Jews he sought to rescue.

"Love" and "Peace" would both become key messages, and the means for conveying the messages, of the Second Vatican Council. When asked what he planned for the Second Vatican Council to accomplish, Pope John XXIII communicated symbolically by striding over to a window and pushing it wide open. His main desire, he said, was that Vatican II might be "*a spectacle of truth, unity, and charity*"(3) and "*a spectacle of love.*"(4)

For Pope John XXIII peace was a necessity for the world's survival. With great earnestness he proclaimed, "... *in this age of ours, which prides itself on its atomic power, it is irrational to believe that war is still an apt means of vindicating violated rights.*"(5)

For the Roman Catholic Church, he yearned for *aggiornamento*, an updating renewal in all aspects of the Church's life, so that there might be a fresh, vibrant presentation of the faith.(6) Because of Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Mass, professed in Latin for more than a millennium, would henceforth be spoken in the vernacular languages of the people. Instead of priests keeping their backs to their congregations, priests would now face their parishioners with love and hospitality.

There would also be a renewal of openness in ecumenical and interfaith relations because of the Second Vatican Council. When Pope John XXIII greeted a delegation of Jews in the 1960's, he communicated an astoundingly warm openness when he said, "*I am Joseph, your brother.*"(7) Believing that God's redemptive power and presence may be perceived in every historical moment, Pope John XXIII was passionate about paying attention to history and seizing upon propitious moments which history afforded the human family for the betterment of all of God's people.

Pope John XXIII's effect on the Roman Catholic Church has been and remains immense. Liturgically, ecclesially, organizationally, and theologically, his mark can be seen almost everywhere in those who have followed him in the papacy. For one crucial example, since Pope John XXIII's time an ordered society has been understood, in Catholic circles, to have three goals: freedom (liberty); justice (equality); love (solidarity and participation).(8)

At the John XXIII Pastoral Center in Charleston, West Virginia, there is an arresting statement by Pope John XXIII inscribed at an interior entrance. It is a striking summation of Pope John XXIII's spirit and the legacy he bequeathed both to his Church and to the world. People of the 21st century have every reason to pay close attention to Pope John XXIII's exemplary leadership and extraordinary grace: *"Let us look at each other without mistrust. Let us meet each other without fear. Let us talk with each other without surrendering principle."* (9)

Praying with Pope John XXIII—Suggestions for Use

- Day 1 Pray today by meditating on the surprising grace Pope John XXIII was for the Roman Catholic Church and for the world. Recall how the possibilities for greatness are often discounted in everyone, including ourselves. Now pray for the insight to discern the greatness in every person you meet today and also in the person you behold in the mirror.
- Day 2 Today let your prayers be on behalf of your faith community, that it might know deep and rejuvenating renewal. Pray that this renewed will increase the vitality and effectiveness of your faith community in all ways.
- Day 3 Pray for peace today, in any manner you choose, for any group, municipality, region, state, or nation that is of concern to you. Regarding the world situation, before you pray, be inspired by Pope John XXIII and ask the following simple question: "Is war an apt means of vindicating violated rights?"
- Day 4 Before you begin praying today, recite the words of St. Bernard which Pope John XXIII learned from his hometown priest. Now pray for a heart to live out such wisdom.
- Day 5 Pray today by considering what "a spectacle of love" might look like in your family, among your friends, on your job, in your community of faith.
- Day 6 Pray today for an increase in openness and sensitivity in ecumenical and interfaith relations in your community.

Day 7 Pray today by reciting the quotation from the John XXIII Pastoral Center in Charleston, West Virginia. *“Let us look at each other without mistrust. Let us meet each other without fear. Let us talk with each other without surrendering principle.”* Memorize it, if you choose. Now use this quotation as your own motto as you go about you day’s activities. Share the quotation with whomever you meet. Let the prayer echo in the lives of others.

NOTES

- 1 Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* ,
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html.
- 2 Pope John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul: The Autobiography of Pope John XXIII*, translated by Dorothy White (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 448.
- 3 Pope John XXIII, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, No. 62;
<http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/resources/j23unity.htm>.
- 4 *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, Michael Downey, editor (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), p. 615.
- 5 *Pacem in Terris* , No. 127.
- 6 Helen Rose Ebaugh, "Vatican II," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, William H. Swatos, Jr., editor(Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira press, 1998), p. 539; See also *Pacem in Terris*.
- 7 *“I am Joseph, Your Brother,”* film by Directed by Amy Kronish and Eli Tal-El, 2001, Israel.
- 8 *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, p. 580.
- 9 I once had the privilege of serving as the keynoter for the Ministers Retreat of the West Virginia Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) which was held at the John XXIII Pastoral Center in Charleston, West Virginia. After my obligations of presentations, lectures, and sermons were finished, I finally had some time to pay attention to my surroundings and discovered – to my pleasant surprise – the astounding statement by Pope John XXIII at the interior entrance to the Pastoral Center. This statement soon became the motto for “Religion on the Line,” a live Sunday morning radio talk show that Rabbi Michael Zedek, Fr. Thom Savage and I began in 1993. It was then, and remains to this day, a great watchword for our radio call-in show and also a great philosophy by which to live cooperatively with other religions.

FOR FURTHER READING, STUDY, AND REFLECTION

Pope John XXIII, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, No. 62;<http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/resources/j23unity.htm>.

Pope John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul: The Autobiography of Pope John XXIII*, translated by Dorothy White (New York: Doubleday, 1965)

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Amy Kronish and Eli Tal-El, *“I am Joseph, Your Brother,”* film, 2001, Israel.

The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality, ed. by Michael Downey (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993)