

Meet Blessed Pope John XXIII

(1881-1963)

Pope John XXIII was born Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli in Italy, the third of thirteen children of a poor peasant family. He would walk to school barefoot and carry his shoes so he wouldn't wear out the leather.

He was ordained a priest in 1904, when he was 23 and only two years later was asked to be the secretary of the new bishop of Bergamo (his diocese). The bishop was very good leader, a hard, hard worker, and, most of all, a man of the people. Roncalli learned a lot from his bishop who showed him that the Church was called to live out the Gospel in the world. Roncalli worked with Bishop Radini-Tedeschi on the reorganization of the diocese, an experience that would be very important when he became a bishop and then pope.

After serving a term as a medical chaplain during World War I, he was assigned to the church diplomatic corps. His diplomatic missions sent him to countries where there was misunderstanding between Catholic Christians and other Christians. This work filled him with the hope that someday the churches might be reunited.

In 1953, when he was seventy-two, Roncalli was named a cardinal and became the bishop of Venice. He enjoyed his role as the city's pastor and expected to remain there the rest of his life. He set about creating and implementing a pastoral plan for his archdiocese (just like we are doing here in Boston!), much in the manner of his mentor, Bishop Radini-Tedeschi.

Five years later, Pope Pius XII died and Cardinal Roncalli went to Rome in October 1958 to participate in electing Pius XII's successor. On the third day of the conclave (the meeting to elect a pope), two cardinals went to his room and told him they were convinced he was about to be elected – which, much to Angelo's surprise, turned out to be true. He was probably elected because he was nearly 78 years old and was not expected to make sweeping changes. But everybody was in for a big surprise.

Pope John had heard critics complain that the Church was irrelevant – something we might hear or think today too. Pope John listened to this criticism and believed Jesus called the Church to respond. On January 25, 1959, 100 days after his election, John XXIII announced his plans to hold an ecumenical council to help bring about his hopeful vision of the Church. The Second Vatican Council opened on October 11, 1962, bringing together over 2000 bishops from all continents. Nearly a half million people came to St. Peter's Square for the opening celebration. Pope John was overwhelmed.

Pope John set as the Council's immediate task the renewal of the religious life of Catholics, the updating of the Church's teaching and organization. The Second Vatican Council launched a wide range of changes in the Catholic Church that we are still working on today. Amid this hectic schedule, John found time to pay surprise visits to hospitals, orphanages and jails around the city of Rome. He enjoyed talking with people so much that he often took walks through Rome disguised in a priest's cassock. He was much loved. When he died, the whole world grieved.

Sources

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