



## Blessed John XXIII (1958-1963)



His Holiness John XXIII (28 Oct. 1958-3 June 1963) was the third of thirteen children in a family of peasant farmers. Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was born on 25 November 1881 at Sotto il Monte, near Bergamo. After attending the village school and the two seminaries at Bergamo, he went on a scholarship to the S. Apollinare Institute, Rome, in 1901, graduating as Doctor of Theology in 1904. Secretary to Bishop Radini-Tedeschi of Bergamo 1905-14, he also lectured in Church history at the diocesan seminary. Conscripted in the First World War, he served first as a hospital orderly and later as a chaplain. In 1921 Benedict XV promoted him national director of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. In his spare time he wrote monographs on diocesan history and St. Charles Borromeo (1538-84); and his researches in the Ambrosian Library, Milan, brought him into contact with Achille Ratti. It was Ratti who, as Pius XI, launched him on a diplomatic career, appointing him titular Archbishop of Areopolis and Apostolic Visitor (from 1931 Apostolic Delegate) to Bulgaria in March 1925 and Apostolic Delegate to Turkey and Greece in 1934. He much enjoyed the latter position, establishing friendly relations with members of the Turkish government and leaders of the Orthodox Churches. During the German occupation of Greece (1941-4) he worked to relieve distress and prevent the deportation of Jews. Appointed Nuncio to France on 22 December 1944, he dealt tactfully but firmly with the problem of the many bishops accused of collaborating with the Vichy regime; negotiated with the government over the financing of Church schools and the nomination of bishops; and arranged for German prisoners-of-war who were ordinands to follow courses in theology at Chartres. He also looked favourably on experiments with worker priests, and from 1952 was Permanent Observer for the Holy See at UNESCO. On 12 January 1953 he was named Cardinal, and on 15 January Patriarch of Venice, where he was noted for his pastoral zeal, informality, and firm resistance to communist manoeuvres. In 1958 he completed the fifth and last volume of his studies on St. Charles Borromeo. At the conclave of 25-28 October 1958 he was elected at the twelfth ballot; and was crowned on 4 November, the feast of his revered Charles Borromeo. Almost seventy-seven, many regarded his appointment as a caretaker one. It proved, however, a decisive turning-point.

At his coronation mass, John XXIII announced his desire to be above all things a good shepherd, and this was the hallmark of his pontificate. At his first consistory he abolished the rule, dating from Sixtus V, fixing 70 as the maximum number of Cardinals, and by 1962 he had increased the college to 87, making it larger and more international than ever before. On 25 January 1959 he proposed three major projects: a diocesan synod for Rome, an ecumenical council, and the revision of canon law. He held the synod, the first in Rome's history, in St. John Lateran from 24 to 31 January 1960; an overture to the Council, its aim was to reinvigorate church life in Rome itself. His outstanding achievement, however, was the Second Vatican Council, the calling of which he attributed to a sudden inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Its objective, he later explained, was to be a new Pentecost, a means of regeneration for the Church, bringing its teaching, discipline, and organisation 'up to date' (the term he used was 'aggiornamento'), and opening a way towards the reunion of the separated brethren of east and west. He set up preparatory commissions and secretariats on 5 June 1960 and opened the Council itself in St. Peter's on 11 October 1962. Official observers from eighteen non-Roman churches were present by invitation, and in his address he urged the Fathers to expound truth positively without relying on anathemas. Although

he did not attend the deliberations himself, he intervened decisively on 21 November 1962 to rule that the conservative schema on revelation, which had been rejected by more than half but not the necessary two-thirds of the Fathers, should be redrafted by a mixed commission. On 8 December 1962 he closed the first session, adjourning the Council for nine months. Stricken with illness, he did not, however, live to see its resumption.

John XXIII set in motion his projected revision of canon law by creating a pontifical commission to deal with the question (28 Mar. 1962); he had earlier (22 Feb. 1959) established a new pontifical commission for cinema, radio, and television. His concern for the liturgy was shown in his approval of new rubrics for the breviary and the missal (25 July 1960), his insertion of the name of St. Joseph in the canon of the mass (13 Nov. 1962), and his permission for the use of the vernacular by certain Uniate Churches. His Encyclicals and other pronouncements were more pastoral than dogmatic in character. His major Encyclicals were *Ad Petri Cathedram* (29 June 1959), in which he pleaded that truth, unity, and peace should be promoted in the spirit of love, and greeted non-Catholics as 'separated brethren and sons'; *Mater et Magistra* (15 May 1961), which reinforced and brought up to date the social teaching of Leo XIII and Pius XI and called on richer nations to help the poorer ones; and *Pacem in Terris* (11 Apr. 1963), which, addressed to all mankind, set out the recognition of human rights and duties as the foundation of world peace, and, distinguishing between Marxist ideology and the aspirations of Communist regimes, pressed for peaceful coexistence between the West and the Communist East. This last created a widespread impression, not least in the Soviet bloc, and led to his receiving Nikita Khrushchev's son-in-law in the spring of 1963. It also marked an important step in the inauguration by the Vatican of a more open eastern policy. During the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 John XXIII publicly urged both the USA and the USSR to exercise caution, winning the respect of N. Khrushchev as well as John F. Kennedy. Next year the International Balzan Foundation awarded him its Peace Prize.

As these initiatives suggest, John XXIII constantly wanted dialogue with the world, irrespective of creed. His concern for Christian unity was expressed in his establishment (5 June 1960) of the Secretariat for Christian Unity. Other significant gestures were his dispatch of personal envoys to Istanbul to greet Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I (1948-72) on 27 June 1961, and his reception of Dr. Geoffrey Fisher, the Archbishop of Canterbury, on 20 December 1960 (the first Anglican Archbishop to be so received). He also exchanged greetings with Patriarch Alexis of Moscow. In November 1961, with his approval, five official Catholic observers attended the World Council of Churches in New Delhi. He removed words potentially offensive to Jews from the Good Friday liturgy, and on one occasion introduced himself to Jewish visitors with the words: 'I am Joseph, your brother'.

Warm-hearted and unaffectedly simple in spite of his erudition and command of many languages, attached to his humble origins and always retaining a keen sense of humour, John XXIII had a major impact on his office, in particular giving the episcopate a new awareness of its importance. Typically, at Christmas 1958 he revived the custom, which had lapsed in 1870, of visiting the Regina Coeli prison and one of the local hospitals. The death of this simple and holy man (after a prolonged and painful illness), which was relayed directly by television, deeply moved believers and men and women of good will. *The Times* of London commented that few pontificates had so captured the imagination of the world. On 3 September 2000 he was beatified by John Paul II.

John XXIII appointed 24 new members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, including such leading lights of the scientific world as: J. Chadwick, E.J. Conway, P.A.M. Dirac, R.A. Fisher, G. Giacomello, G.C. de Hevesy, C.N. Hinshelwood, S. Hörstadius, L. Leprince-Ringuet, and J.H. Oort. Four Cardinals were also made Honorary Members: A.M. Albareda, A.G. Cicognani, D. Tardini, and E. Tisserant. Reflecting his ecumenical spirit, John XXIII insisted on the importance of expanding the geographical representation of the membership of the Academy, significantly increasing the number of non-European members, for example: C. Chagas (Brazil), J.C. Eccles (Australia), V.F. Hess (USA), A. Hurtado (Peru), S. Mizushima (Japan), C.V. Raman (India), M. Sandoval Vallarta (Mexico), and H. Yukawa (Japan). He also established the Pius XI Medal to be awarded to a young scientist who had distinguished himself or herself at an international level. John XXIII gave two papal addresses to the Academy, in the first of which (30 Oct. 1961) he stressed that it had the high task of participating in the educational mission of the Church: 'it is not because of a desire to remain true to the humanistic traditions inherited from the Renaissance that the Church welcomes you. It is because of the consciousness that in receiving you she is fulfilling part of her constant mission as mother and educator'. Always closely interested in the activities of the Pontifical Academy during his brief pontificate, John XXIII left it in a vigorous and 'up-dated' state, increasingly able to perform its task of being the 'Scientific Senate' of the Church at a time of increasing reflection and debate generated by the climate, deliberations and conclusions of his Second Vatican Council.