

Remembering a Friend to the World

John XXIII

1881-1963

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Ten years ago — at 11 minutes before eight on Monday evening, June 3, 1963 — death brought to a close the short four-and-a-half-year reign of Pope John XXIII.

When Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was elected pope on Oct. 28, 1958 it was generally expected that he would be merely an "interim" pope, one, who, considering his age at the time, would keep the "barque of Peter" on a steady, even course.

But, as it turned out, the self-effacing son of Italian peasants, acting, as he firmly believed, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, inaugurated a revolution in the Roman Catholic Church.

He worked to revise ecclesiastical law, increased the size and representation of the College of Cardinals, and authorized the use of local languages, in place of the time-honored Latin, in the liturgy.

By all odds, however, his most significant and daring achievement was his summoning of the first ecumenical council of the Church in nearly 100 years, Vatican II.

John XXIII had been pope for a mere 90 days, when, Jan. 25, 1959, he made the first and totally unexpected announcement of his plan to convoke the council.

When, four years later, on Oct. 11, 1962, the council finally opened, despite misgivings from many quarters, the 80-year-old Pope gently chided "the prophets of doom" within the Church and spoke of the world's need for the medicine of mercy.

"In this assembly, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit," the pope told the council fathers and the non-Catholic observers present, "we wish to inquire how we ought to renew ourselves, so that we may be found increasingly faithful to the gospel of Christ."

"We shall take pains," he went on, "so to present to the men of this age God's truth in its integrity and purity that they may understand it and gladly assent to it."

Pope John spoke of his great hope — that the council would promote Christian unity. "The Catholic Church," he said, "considers it her duty to work actively so that there may be fulfilled the great mystery of that unity which Jesus Christ invoked with fervent prayer from His heavenly Father on the eve of His sacrifice."

Thus, less than nine months before his death, John XXIII set the pastoral tone and ecumenical flavor that was to dominate council deliberations.

John also ended a tradition of papal seclusions by his frequent travels around Rome to visit orphanages, hospitals, and reform schools.



One day he astonished everybody by dropping in for a visit to Rome's Regina Coeli (Queen of Heaven) Prison, addressing the inmates as "dear sons and brothers," telling them he understood how a man may break the law to steal for his hungry family.

At one point he insisted that the prison authorities open up the grated doors of a cell block where so-called incorrigibles were confined. "Do not bar them from me," he said. "They are all children of our Lord."

John published eight documents during his brief rule, including three major encyclicals.

The first encyclical, Ad Petri Cathedram (To the Chair of Peter), dated June 29, 1959, dealt with "the seeking and promoting, under the impulse of charity, of truth, unity, and peace."

On May 15, 1961, he issued his Mater et Magistra (Mother and Teacher) a major pronouncement in which he dwelt on the attitude of the Church toward working people.

Enlarging on the Church's doctrine, he stressed the basic human dignity of workers, insisting that simple justice demanded that all classes of men should participate in and benefit from the increasing productivity provided by modern technology.

He also discussed the moral obligations of the prosperous nations toward underdeveloped and impoverished countries.

Important as this pronouncement was, it was overshadowed by Pope John's stunning encyclical, issued during the recess of Vatican II on April 11, 1963, Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth), the first encyclical ever to be addressed not only to Catholics but "to all men of good will."

And men of good will in every country and of all religions — and none — praised it as embodying the best hopes of mankind.

Indeed, one expert hailed John's declaration of the Rights of Man as deserving to rank "with the Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, and all the greatest pronouncements in the history of the world."

In a key passage, Pope John affirmed: "Every human being has the right to honor God according to the dictates of an upright conscience, and the right to profess his religion privately and publicly."

In this connection, the pontiff set forth another key principle: "One must never confuse error and the person who errs, not even when there is a question of error, or inadequate knowledge of truth, in the moral or religious field."

The child who was destined to make an indelible mark on the history of the Catholic Church was born in a village near Bergamo, Italy, in 1881, of pious peasant-farmers. He achieved an early-felt desire to be a priest when he was ordained in 1904.

Service as an Army chaplain on battlefields and in hospitals during World War I taught him to hate war, but to love the battle-weary soldiers who fought for the things in which they believed.

After his consecration as archbishop in 1925, the young prelate began 19 years of diplomatic work in the Byzantine world: Bulgaria, Turkey, and Greece. There he acquired a deep understanding of the Orthodox Churches, that fired an ambition to see them united once more with Rome.

At the end of World War II, he was assigned to Paris where he helped settle long-standing French differences with the Vatican.

Following almost a decade in France, Archbishop Roncalli was named cardinal and appointed Patriarch of Venice.

Shortly before his 77th birthday, he accepted his election as Pope with the words, "I bow my head to the chalice of bitterness and the yoke of the Cross."

In 1965, Pope Paul VI initiated proceedings for the beatification of John XXIII, and in 1968, the Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints began to investigate the evidence of Angelo Roncalli's sanctity.

Pope Paul Praises Work of Pope John

Vatican City (RNS) — Pope Paul VI has eulogized his "great and unique predecessor," Pope John XXIII for the "extraordinary manifestations" of his short pontificate, "above all, the incomparable and inexhaustible one" of the Second Vatican Council.

At the same time, Pope Paul decried what he called "certain rash and biased interpretations"

of his predecessor's life and accomplishments, staunchly denying that John had been "the patron of protest" or "the Pope of liberation from the chains of tradition," as he is often portrayed now.

Pope Paul delivered a eulogy at a solemn pontifical Mass he celebrated in St. Peter's Basilica on the eve of the 10th anniversary of the death of Pope John.

Pope John, said the reigning pontiff, did not promote an "aggiornamento" or updating of the Roman Catholic Church, "that was indiscriminate and without pre-established limits, as if by the authority of his name it was possible to shatter the very authority that makes the Church at once one and universal."

Referring to Pope John's published diary, "Journal of a

Soul," as a "spiritual treasure" containing "the thoughts of a long life" and "candid and religious expressions of his intimate spiritual history," Pope Paul said:

"Listening to his simple and sincere voice, we shall do well, ten years after his death, to place ourselves humbly in his spiritual school, to learn above all to know Pope John in his authentic reality

as a man of the people, full of sensitivity for home surroundings, and to admire him as a priest full of the most sincere and devout wisdom."

"Finally," said Pope Paul, "we see him as Pope, tempering the lofty consciousness of his supreme ministry with docility to the inspiration of the Spirit — to be above all the 'Servant of the servants of God.'"