

### **Homily on Pope Saint John XXIII**

Angelo Rancalli was born in 1881 into a family of sharecroppers with 14 children. He shared with others that his very earliest memory was a one kilometer walk his mother took he and his three sisters on. It was a mini pilgrimage to a church dedicated to Mary that was less than a mile from their farm home. He was only four years old. They arrived late and the church was full. So his mother lifted him up to a window of the church and said, "Look how beautiful the Madonna is. I have consecrated you completely to her."

At 25 year of age he already had a doctorate in Theology and was ordained a year later.

He always wanted to be a country priest but he was always asked to take on basically difficult positions that most priests would carefully try to avoid.

He was the secretary to his bishop for 9 years. This is usually not an enviable job.

When World War One broke out he was drafted in the Italian Army and served five years as a stretcher bearer and a Chaplain. He learned the ugliness of war and he took the lesson into his future.

Then he was made the Apostolic visitor or Apostolic Delegate to Moslem and Orthodox countries where Catholics were few. Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece.

But there he came to know and respect persons of other faiths and he learned ways to reach them and get along with them. This was a valuable for his future in ways not even he could have realized.

Totally unknown to himself God was preparing him to be not only a holy priest but also one who loved humanity as Christ does.

From 1935 through all of World War II as an archbishop he did much to help the Jews. He saved thousands and after the war he was honored by the Jewish community and given the honored title of "Righteous Gentile."

During World War Two some of the bishops of France had become involved with the Nazis.

I 1944 after the liberation of France, he was given the uncomfortable position of Papal Nuncio to France with the directive that he was to oversee the retirement of these bishops.

In 1953 he was appointed as Patriarch of Venice.

It was while he was serving in that diocese that he was elected Pope in 1958.

The Conclave of Cardinals were deadlocked in choosing a successor, so Cardinal Roncalli was selected to be a caretaker Pope for a few years. But God now had in position the person he wanted to open the windows of the church by convening a new Ecumenical Council.

Pope John Was the first pontiff in modern time to go out of the Vatican. On Christmas Day and Easter he surprised people by showing up at hospitals , and prisons and in poor neighborhoods of Rome. He loved people especially the ordinary people.

The people of Rome called him “The Good Pope”.

Many of the Curial Cardinals were opposed to the idea of a council and felt it was not necessary . Some were even irate at his idea.

He knew in advance that this would be the case and he used all of the diplomatic strategies he had learned in those prior difficult assignments as a Vatican diplomat to move the idea of a Council through a resistant hierarchy.

One cardinal (Siri) said that Pope John was the worst thing that had happened to the church in 500 years.

That cardinal outlived Pope John and in his later years that prelate said that John XXII had truly made a major contribution to the Church.

Pope John named one of his favorite bishops , Bishop Montini, to the rank of Cardinal. Bishop Montini had been deliberately passed over for that honor by the prior pope because of justifiable criticism he had made in prior years. Cardinal Montini became Pope John XXII’s successor, Pope Paul VI.

Vatican II Council opened on this date October 11 in 1962. The Pope had terminal stomach cancer at that time and he was dead within three months. The diagnosis of terminal cancer came a few months before the opening session. He said to one confident, “ my role in this council is to suffer.”

During his last months as pope he offered to negotiate between the Soviet Union and the United States who were at the height of the Cold War. We might remember the Cuban Missile Crisis of that year when we almost went to nuclear war with the Soviet Union.

His offer was not accepted but he became very popular in both countries because of his desire to bring peace. His encyclical *Pacem in Terris* , on the subject of war

and peace, had an effect on the Soviet leader and probably played a role in the defusing of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Pope John XXIII became the first pope to be named Man of the Year by Time Magazine.

His greatest diplomatic challenge was to work behind the scene in communicating with Nikita Khrushchev to obtain permission for Iron Curtain Cardinals to attend the Ecumenical Council. He also worked behind the scene to invite Orthodox leaders to attend and obtain permission from Russia for Russian Orthodox representatives to attend the council. These breakthroughs were totally unexpected

He died Jan. 3, 1963 at age 81

Our President Johnson awarded him posthumously the PRESIDENTIAL MEDAL OF FREEDOM.

His feast day is not the date of his death as is the usual custom but today Oct. 11 because this date was the opening session of the Vatican Council II in 1963.

There are many unmistakable similarities between Pope Francis and Pope John. They are primarily in their outgoing love of people, all people including those who were separated Christians and non-Christians.

They both have a living compassion for those who are suffering or struggling.

Pope Francis recently expressed a metaphor that described how he saw the Church today.

He said, "The Church today is a field hospital after the battle. What the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness and proximity."

Pope John said, "The bishop must apply the balm of gentleness to the wounds of mankind."

Pope John wrote an Encyclical "Mater et Magister" in which he called out for the church to be concerned for the whole world and for all of humanity to be responsible for each other regardless of differences in nations, religions, etc. He saw the economic system as servant of the good of the community. His encyclical upset some American capitalists.

Pope Francis is not hesitant to challenge when needed. He is shaking up the Roman Curia. He says the Church must strip itself of vanity, arrogance, and pride. When he sees the world of capitalism and globalization he offers critical analysis because of their contribution to the widening divide between “haves” and “have nots.” He recognizes his own and the Church’s role to work “to eliminate the structural causes of poverty.”

Pope John wrote an encyclical “Pacem in Terris” , “Peace on Earth” and he expressed the longing of humanity for real peace.

Pope Francis has peace as one of his major concerns. He already called for a day of prayer and fasting for peace and the end of use of chemical weapons in Syria. He invited Palestinian, Mamoud Abbas, and Israeli President Shimon Perez to come to the Vatican with the Patriarch of Constantinople to pray for peace

Pope John XXIII drew on the legacy of Pope Leo XIII who wrote the first encyclical on social justice issues.

It seems that in many attribute of personality and concern for the most ordinary of persons and the sufferings of the world, Pope Francis is echoing Pope John.

In his book, *Pope John XXIII*, author Thomas Cahill sets forth “The Three Secrets of John XXIII” :

“The secret of everything is to let yourself be carried by the Lord and to carry the Lord.”

John XXII at his installation as Pope

The secret of my ministry is the crucifix ... Those open arms have been the program of my pontificate: they mean that Christ died for all , for all. No one is excluded from his love, from his forgiveness.”

John XXIII on his deathbed

This was the secret of his personality: he loved people more than power.”

Yves Congar