

Pope John XXIII

The Man
that Became the Pope
that Called the Council
that Changed the Church

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The Man...

A Changing World – An Outdated Church

Social Turmoil – Science & Technology

From his birth in November of 1881 through becoming one of the most significant popes in October of 1958, to his death in June of 1963, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli saw and participated in a great deal of global change. Just prior to and during his occupation of the papacy, the world breathed the air of the lingering Cold War (from 1945 to 1991), the Korean War (1950), the erecting of the Berlin Wall (1961), the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), and the election of a young Catholic US President (Nov, 1960).¹

Scientific and technological advancements had changed much of the world, revolutionising how people communicated and travelled. Technologies were finally taking hold, and people felt a strong separation from earlier times, and the term “post-modern” emerged.²

Battling Protestantism & Budding Post-Modernism

The Reformation and the Counter Reformation had left a sharp, strict and continuing separation between Catholics and Protestants. Some leaders of the Roman Church were eager to break from “triumphalist” tendencies and the “fortress mentality” which had characterised the Church since the Council of Trent.³

Also, the emerging Post-Modern climate was characterised by people seeing Modern Christendom as “less and less a relevant and convincing model”.⁴ Although below the surface there was a growing theological movement working toward relevance and relating to the world, “...the hierarchy of the Church was still seeking

¹ Giuseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II* (New York: Orbis, 2006), 2.

² Thomas S. Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church, Rev. and Expanded ed.* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 396-7.

³ *Ibid*, 393-4.

⁴ Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II*, 2.

to put down practically every effort to relate Christianity in a positive way to the modern world...”⁵

...that Became the Pope...

A Seasoned Man – A Soft Heart

Scholarship & Faith

At seminary in Bergamo and Rome he took an interest in history, and particularly seeing God’s hand within it.⁶ This interest collided soon with emerging Christological controversies, which distinguished increasingly between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith.⁷ A pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and the later influence of Cardinal Andrea Ferrari, enabled him to take a “soft” stance on modernism in the Church, yet faithful to core beliefs, and affirming of tradition.⁸ His affirmation of the “renewal” of historical criticism shrewdly reframed the issue in a Church-friendly way.⁹

Ecumenism & Diplomacy

His work in Bulgaria (apostolic visitor), Turkey, Greece (Apostolic Declaration for Turkey and Greece) and France (papal nuncio) connected him with non-Catholics and politicians. A particularly difficult (though strengthening) stretch was in France, where he struggled to maintain relations between the government of Charles de Gaulle, Pius XII’s Vatican and the French bishops.¹⁰

As Pope, he would have an emphasis on “dialogue” and his encyclicals *Pacem in Terris* and *Mater et Magistra* would be addressed to “all men of good will”,

⁵ Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought, rev ed. Vol. III* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 465.

⁶ Nancy Celaschi, ‘Blessed Pope John XXIII: An “Ordinary” Holiness’, *St. Anthony Messenger* 108(4): (2000), 32.

⁷ Margaret Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII: Pope of the Century* (London: Continuum, 2000), 30.

⁸ Celaschi, ‘An “Ordinary” Holiness’, 32.

⁹ Hebblethwaite, *Pope of the Century*, 32-33.

¹⁰ Celaschi, ‘An “Ordinary” Holiness’, 33.

appealing to work together to build a better world.¹¹ He was warm to non-Catholics and those “not yet Christian”.¹² In another encyclical, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, he issued the famous dictum “unity in essentials, freedom in doubtful, love in everything”.¹³

War & Compassion

Roncalli was significantly affected by his time as a stretcher-bearer in WWI, later recalling an Austrian with a bayonet-torn chest, whose “image became ever more vivid” to him whilst writing *Pacem in Terris*.¹⁴ In Turkey, he had worked to rescue and aid many Jews escaping from Hitler’s Germany, and was later horrified upon viewing footage of the Jewish body-piles of Auschwitz and Buchenwald.¹⁵ His heart for peace continued as Pope, and he was “deeply involved in behind-the-scenes initiatives to resolve the Cuban missile crisis”.¹⁶

Humour & Humility

One of the things, however, that made him such a popular Pope, was his quick wit and refusal to take himself too seriously. As papal nuncio, he was once asked if he was embarrassed by the “scandal” of women wearing low-cut dresses in his presence. His reply was, “Why no. ...they don’t look at her. They look at the apostolic nuncio to see how he’s taking it!”¹⁷

Disregarding papal etiquette he worked and walked with the common people, opening his home to friends, visiting schools, prisons, hospitals; mixing and joking with all who crossed his path.¹⁸ Upon the Cardinals choice to make him Pope, his

¹¹ Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, 394-5.

¹² G. C. Berkouwer, *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

¹⁴ Celaschi, ‘An “Ordinary” Holiness’, 32-33.

¹⁵ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language, Updated 2nd ed.* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 452.

¹⁶ Celaschi, ‘An “Ordinary” Holiness’, 35.

¹⁷ James Martin, *My Life with the Saints* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2006), 188.

¹⁸ Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, 394; Celaschi, ‘An “Ordinary” Holiness’, 31; Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 452.

sober and humble statement was, “What I know of my poverty and smallness is enough to cover me with confusion. But seeing the sign of God’s will in the votes of my brother cardinals in the Holy Roman Church, I accept the decision they have made.”¹⁹

...that Called the Council...

A Renewing Council – A Significant Struggle

The need for change

Roncalli (taking the controversial name John XXIII) was expected to be more of an interim Pope. Many longed for the healing of the traumas of a “long and dramatic reign” of Pius XII, but people soon realised that this was a Pope of change.²⁰ Vatican II (V2), with reformist agenda elements – liturgical, biblical, catechetical, ecumenical – was announced only three months into his papacy.²¹ He wanted a pastoral, rather than doctrinal, Council.²²

His vision for a “new Pentecost” and an “*aggiornamento*” (updating) shaped his Council-opening speech, outlining two goals: 1) adapting the “deposit of revelation to contemporary needs, while remaining faithful to tradition” and 2) applying the “medicine of mercy” instead of the “arms of authority.”²³

Key Council Leadership

Apparently wanting V2 to be “another glorious Roman pageant”, the Roman Curia opposed the renewal vision, seizing key proposal-drafting positions, and

¹⁹ Martin, *My Life with the Saints*, 190.

²⁰ Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II*, 1-2.

²¹ Jared Wicks, ‘Further Light on Vatican Council II’, *Catholic Historical Review* 95(3): (2009), 562.

²² Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 453.

²³ González, *A History of Christian Thought*, 466.

hastening the submission of seventy schemata.²⁴ John's address (closing the opening session) subtly yet clearly opposed them, and called for a fresh vision.²⁵

Another key move by John XXIII concerned a key document, *On the Sources of Revelation*. Criticised as unsuitable, Scholastic and negative, rejecting it would represent a huge step forward for V2 and the Church.²⁶ When the rejecting vote failed ever so slightly to reach the two-thirds majority, John decisively intervened, sending it back to be re-written.²⁷

...that Changed the Church

A New Catholicism

Catalyst for Change

It must be admitted that Pope John was not solely responsible for *all* of the change effected by V2.²⁸ Nonetheless, his relatively short papacy was one of the most important in Catholic history. His strong influence in updating the Catholic church to modernism and opening it to non-Catholics is reflected well in the words uttered by a cabdriver in Rome upon his death on June 3, 1963: "I'm not a Catholic, but he was our pope, too."²⁹

²⁴ Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, 398.

²⁵ Ibid, 398.

²⁶ Ibid, 400.

²⁷ Ibid, 400-1; see also Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II*, 27.

²⁸ Wicks, 'Further Light on Vatican Council II', 562; see also Melissa J. Wilde, *Vatican II: A Sociological Analysis of Religious Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 61-68, who argues that whilst he provided the opportunity for reform to take place, he lacked influence in the implementation of that change, which followed during the 30 months after his death.

²⁹ Martin, *My Life with the Saints*, 195.

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