John XXIII was a hugely influential pope who struggled to reform the Roman Catholic Church and give it a more modern face. He summoned Vatican Council II and sought to address all issues in the church, including controversial matters such as priestly celibacy, artificial birth control, and Jewish-Christian relations.

Several historic popes and bishops served as exemplars for John XXIII, including Gregory I (590–604), a pastoral pope who referred to himself as "servant of the servants of God" and sent Augustine of Canterbury to convert England, and Charles Borromeo, scion of the Medici, cardinal archbishop of Milan, and Catholic reformer, who spent his personal wealth caring for the poor of his diocese. More immediately John XXIII found models in Leo XIII, who issued Rerum Novarum, the first encyclical to address modern socio-economic problems, Giacamo Maria Radini-Tedeschi (1857–1914), the bishop of Bergamo under whom the future pope first served, and Benedict XV (r. 1914–22), who reined in the antimodernist faction in the Vatican.

Born Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli to a peasant family in Sotto il Monte in Lombardy, he always knew he would be a priest. He never lost touch with the strong piety and direct simplicity of his ancestors and relatives. Early on he was sent to study in Rome but got drafted into the army instead. The raucous ways of army life shocked him, but he mellowed when he later served as a Walt Whitmanesque orderly in World War I. His war experience led him to become a champion of peacemaking the rest of his life.

The student Angelo was always excited by ideas and not afraid of the modern world and its scientific orientation. In his diaries he criticized St. Pius X for being afraid of new things. He served as secretary to the bishop of Bergamo and professor of church history before being called to Rome to serve as a minor official in the Congregation for Missions. Against Vatican policy, he supported the Popular Party of Fr. Luigi Sturzo (1871–1959), the only political figure able to stand up to Mussolini. In this struggle he befriended Giovanni Battista Montini, who was to succeed him as Pope as Paul VI. True patriotism, he preached, was not nationalism but brotherly love.

In 1925 Roncalli's life took a fateful turn. He was appointed apostolic nuncio to Bulgaria with the rank of archbishop. As bishop he took the motto Obedientia et Pax, in direct challenge to the Fascist motto Credere, obedire, combattere ("Believe, obey, fight"). This post removed him from Vatican intrigues and put him into direct, warm contact with Eastern Orthodox Christians and Muslims. From this distance Roncalli could observe dispassionately the Vatican's fateful concordats with Mussolini and later Hitler. He became a neighbor to the small Bulgarian contingent of Roman and Uniate Catholics, often incurring the displeasure of Pius XI for reaching beyond his diplomatic brief.

Nine years later Roncalli was appointed apostolic delegate to Greece and Turkey and was stationed in the great city of Istanbul, where he developed a close relationship with the Eastern Orthodox patriarch. While the Vatican was losing its bearings during the war, Angelo, calling in his diplomatic cards, helped to funnel thousands of Jews out of eastern Europe to the Holy Land by issuing certificates of immigration.

As the war ended, Roncalli was appointed nuncio to France, the most desirable assignment in the Vatican diplomatic portfolio. Quietly he engaged leading French thinkers and theologians--Yves Congar, Jacques Maritain, Henri de Lubac, and Cardinal Emmanuel Célestin Suhard (1874–1949)--while the Vatican was reviving its antimodernist propaganda, with French intellectuals as the target.

In 1953 Roncalli was appointed cardinal archbishop of Venice. He came back to Italy expecting to end his life in this post. He visited every parish and set about finding employment for jobless Italians. He worked with everyone, believer and nonbeliever, socialist and communist. He was a reconciler, not a divider. Upon Pius XII's death in 1958, Roncalli experienced a radical turn of fate when the conclave of cardinals elected him pope as a compromise candidate. He took the name John XXIII. The Vatican cardinals were in for a big surprise. He broke precedents: travelling outside the Vatican, jostling with ordinary people, and removing the hated phrase "perfidious Jews" from Holy Week prayers. His encyclical Mater et Magistra (May 15, 1961) addressed the problems of the arms race and economic disparity among the nations.
In 1959 John XXIII issued the call for Vatican Council II at St. Paul's Outside the Walls, a church symbolically outside the original precincts of Rome. Over the opposition of the old guard, under Cardinal Ottaviani (1890–1979), the pope allowed the council participants to deliberate on all topics. Before Vatican II was completed, John XXIII died in 1963. His signature encyclical was Pacem in Terris, issued in the year of his death.

He was canonized by Pope Francis I in 2014.

Further Information


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