The short pontificate of John XXIII—1958 to 1963—reinvigorated the principle Ecclésia Semper Reformanda (“the Church is always to be reformed”). Known for his modesty and pastoral concern, “Good Pope John” dedicated his ministry to placing the needs of the world at the service of the Church.

Blessed John XXIII
(1881–1963)

Born Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli on November 25, 1881, John XXIII grew up in a small village in the Province of Bergamo in northern Italy. Raised in a large family of sharecroppers, young Angelo quickly developed a hunger for justice and human rights.

As supreme pontiff, John XXIII refused to be a prisoner of the Vatican, and instead modeled the Good Shepherd, visiting the prisons of Rome, reaching out to the sick, and welcoming visitors of every faith and nation. He surprised the world by announcing the Second Vatican Council on January 25, 1959. His hope was that the Council would signal a “new” style for the Church and its authority. John XXIII’s opening words to the Council Fathers reveal this hope: The Church is to employ the “use of the medicine of mercy rather than of severity . . . demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations . . . by making appropriate changes and by the wise organization of mutual cooperation, the church will make individuals, families and peoples really turn their minds to heavenly things” (Quote found in John W. O’Malley, What Happened at Vatican II, 95).

On his deathbed, Pope John pointed to the crucifix near his bed and called it “the secret of my ministry”: “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” (Cahill, Pope John XXIII, 121). John XXIII died peacefully on June 3, 1963, after a silent battle with stomach cancer. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II on September 3, 2000.