POPE JOHN XXIII

THE WORLD HE LIVED IN

Angelo Guiseppe Roncalli was born in and lived through times of great change and several wars. He lived during World War I and World War II. In World War I, while a seminarian, he was conscripted into the army and served as an ambulance attendant. What he saw in war firmly rooted in him a commitment to peace and justice. On the eve of World War II, as a Vatican diplomat in Turkey and Bulgaria, he is credited with saving the lives of many threatened Jewish people. After World War II, during the international race to stockpile nuclear weapons, at age 78, Roncalli was elected Pope, and continually called for peace. When Soviet missiles were found in Cuba, in a courageous broadcast on Vatican Radio, “Good Pope John” said, "We beg all rulers not to be deaf to the cry of humanity." Pope John went further, and worked as an intermediary to end the crisis. Pope John's last encyclical, Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth), is considered his "last will and testament" to the world.

WHO HE WAS

Angelo Guiseppe Roncalli was born on November 25, 1881, in Sotto il Monte, a small farming community in northern Italy. He was the fourth of fourteen children. The family farmed as sharecroppers. Angelo helped his brothers to work in the fields until he entered the seminary in 1892. He began to write spiritual notes at that time that were later collected into a book called Journal of a Soul. Angelo was ordained a priest in Rome in 1904. In 1905 he was appointed secretary to Bishop Tedeschi of Bergamo. Bishop Tedeschi was very involved in the lives of the people. He supported programs that gave dignity and worth to the lives of workers and the poor. Father Roncalli helped him as much as he could. When the bishop died in 1914, Father Roncalli continued to minister in various ways and also taught in the local seminary.

During World War I he served as a sergeant in the medical corps and as a chaplain to wounded soldiers. After the war, he was concerned about the spiritual needs of young people and opened a "Student House" where they could gather for meetings and discussions.

In 1925 he was named a bishop, and chose as his motto Oboedientia et Pax (Obedience and Peace). As bishop, he served in the Middle East, in Bulgaria, Turkey, and Greece. The Middle East was the crossroads of the world. There he met people of many faiths and cultures. Unity among people of different religions and within Christianity itself later became one of his goals as pope. When World War II began, Bishop Roncalli helped Jewish people escape from the Nazis under the protection of "transit visas" from his office. In 1953, he was made Cardinal and Patriarch of Venice.

Cardinal Roncalli was elected Pope on October 28, 1958. His pontificate lasted less than five years, but in that time "Good Pope John" presented to the world "an authentic image of the Good Shepherd." He was the first Pope to leave the Vatican since 1870. He visited prisoners in Rome's city jail. He also visited orphanages, schools, and churches. He was open to all people. He once said, "It often happens that I wake up at night and begin to think about a serious problem and decide I must tell the Pope about it. Then I wake up completely and remember that I am the Pope."

His most memorable act was the calling of the Second Vatican Council, with the goal of renewing the Church. Pope John XXIII opened the Council on October 11, 1962. He had already been diagnosed with stomach cancer, and said to a friend: "At least I have launched this big ship -- others will have to bring it into port."

Pope John XXIII died on June 3, 1963. His lasting work as Pope -- the convening of the Second Vatican Council -- is reflected in the date of his feast day. Usually a saint's feast day is set on or near the date of death but Blessed Pope John XXIII's feast day is the date, October 11, on which he launched the "big ship" of Vatican Council II.

WHAT THIS HOLY PERSON MEANS TO US TODAY

Blessed Pope John XXIII was open-hearted, loving, generous, funny, caring, yet also seriously concerned about the future of the Church. Because he was concerned for the future, he was empowered to act in the present -- no matter what people thought. Blessed Pope John XXIII teaches us that we are never too old for right action, and that it is never too late for peace.
JOHN PAUL II

WHAT THE WORLD WAS LIKE

John Paul II was born just after the end of World War I. Even though peace treaties were signed, the suffering caused by this war continued in countries around the world. During his youth, World War II began and Germany's Nazi army invaded Poland.

WHO HE WAS

Karol Wojtyla was born in Wadowice, Poland. He was a good student and athlete, and developed his talent as an actor. His mother died when he was nine, and his only brother died four years later. These sorrows brought him even closer to his father, whose deep faith inspired him. When Karol decided to become a priest, he had to study in secret because his country was under the rule of Germany’s Nazi government. At the age of 38, he was the youngest man to be appointed bishop in Poland's history.

In 1978, he was elected pope and took the name of John Paul II. His early experiences in Poland during wartime made him a strong supporter of human rights and social justice. He played an important role in helping to end the long rule of Soviet communism in Russia and in Eastern Europe, including his native country of Poland. Pope John Paul II called for solidarity among all people of the world. He traveled more than any pope in history, and visited 129 countries. In addition to his native Polish, he was fluent in many languages: Italian, French, German, English, Spanish, Portuguese, Ancient Greek, and Latin. Everywhere he went, he preached the mission of peace and reconciliation, and the importance of spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

As pope, he established World Youth Day as a way to strengthen the faith of young people. He traveled to cities hosting these celebrations and spoke to young people about the love and joy of following Jesus. In 1981, John Paul II was shot by a Turkish gunman while greeting pilgrims in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. He recovered and later visited the would-be-assassin in prison, forgiving him for the act of violence that nearly took his life. John Paul II died in 2005 after serving as pope for 26 years, one of the longest pontificates in history. On May 1, 2011 Pope Benedict XVI beatified Pope John Paul II.

WHAT THIS SAINT MEANS TO US

He inspired people throughout the world with his deep faith, his courage, and his passion for social justice. He had a deep love of and concern for young people. He helped to bring the Church into the modern world. He reached out to those in deepest need. He reminds us of what it means to love Christ through a deep commitment to our faith and to taking care of those who are poor or oppressed.