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John XXIII

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Pope John XXIII, elected in 1958, soon gained the love and respect of Christians throughout the world. A man of warm humanity, he was also responsible for calling the revolutionary Second Vatican Council.

"Truth calls for the elimination of every trace of racial discrimination, and the consequent recognition of the inviolable principle that all states are by nature equal in dignity..."

POPE JOHN XXIII

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John XXIII was born Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli near Bergamo, Italy, in 1881 and died in 1963. His parents were tenant farmers, but scholarships enabled him to attend seminaries at Bergamo and Rome, where he was ordained in 1904. After serving in World War I, he filled administrative posts at Rome until appointed papal nuncio in turn to Bulgaria (1925–34), Turkey (1934–44) and France (1944–53). In 1953 he became Cardinal Patriarch of Venice. His energy, charity and ability to get on with people of all persuasions marked out his early career.

Roncalli's election, at the age of seventy-six, in the difficult conclave which followed the death of Pius XII in 1958, suggested that he would be a caretaker pope. Instead, he began a new age in the Roman Catholic Church. He issued eight encyclicals. *Mater et Magistra* (1961) updated papal social teaching. It insisted that co-operation between individuals and social groups, rather than national or class struggle, is the basic principle of social order. It stressed for the first time, the duty of developed nations to aid emerging nations by technological means. *Pacem in Terris* (1963) argued that peace flows from right order, that all nations are equal in dignity, and that co-operation and trust must replace the arms race. John XXIII urged reconciliation during the world political crises over Berlin, Cuba and Algeria. He elevated many clergymen from developing nations to the posts of bishop and cardinal. He sought closer ties with Eastern Orthodoxy, sent representatives to the World Council of Churches, and set up the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

The aim of all his work was to update the church (aggiornamento). Accordingly he created a commission to revise canon law. The peak of his achievement was the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), which he called to improve the pastoral work of the church. Once the council opened, the pope intervened rarely, but liberal bishops took courage from his stand.

Whether John XXIII was responsible for shaping post-Vatican II Catholicism is doubtful. His actions before and after becoming pope show him swinging between conservativism and liberalism. His personal spiritual notes, published posthumously as *Journal of a Soul*, reveal a deep but traditional piety. His peasant background and appearance tended to obscure his wide learning. Although he deliberately discouraged the cult of personality, his kindliness and wit made him a charismatic and popular pope.