

# Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 4 in a series

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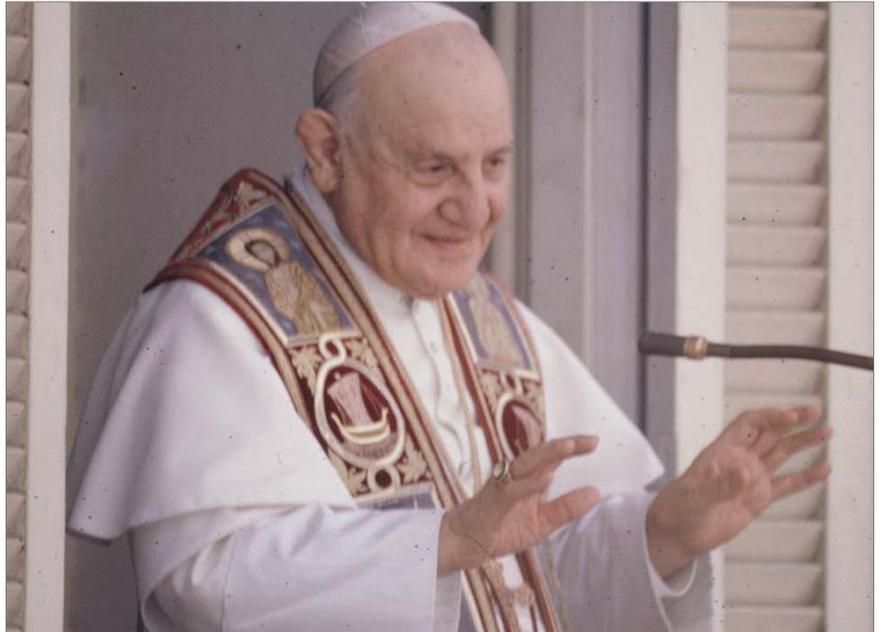
*This year, 2012, marks the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, which began on October 11, 1962, and closed on December 8, 1965. Throughout the year, we'll mark this milestone anniversary by celebrating the Council, and exploring its teachings through bulletin inserts, lectures, and a variety of special events.*

## **Blessed John XXIII: Pope of the Council**

Pope John XXIII was not the only Pope of the twentieth century to think about calling a Council. Pope Pius XI gave serious consideration to the idea in the years following World War I, when Catholics had faced each other across the battlefield. He felt a Council could be an instrument of unity in a Church that still felt the sad divisions of war. In 1948, Pope Pius XII revived the idea, and even formed commissions to consider the possibilities. The work proceeded far enough to develop topics to be addressed by a Council: clarifying doctrine, speaking on the moral issues of modern warfare, and updating the Code of Canon Law. But for various reasons, neither of these proposed Councils ever got off the drawing board. It would be Pope John XXIII, Pius XII's successor, who would finally call a Council.

Blessed John XXIII was born Angelo Roncalli, the son of a large peasant family in the tiny village of Sotto il Monte in northern Italy. Following his ordination, he was chosen to serve as secretary to Bishop Radini-Tedeschi of Bergamo, a progressive bishop who came under investigation by the Vatican for his sympathy with the needs of workers. The pastoral example of Radini-Tedeschi (whom Roncalli afterwards affectionately called 'my bishop') inspired and changed the young priest. At the same time, his fascination with history led him to the archives of the diocese, where he discovered a great treasure in a thirty-nine volume chronicle of the Church in Bergamo following the Council of Trent. These documents highlighted the reform and renewal of the local church, and proved another great inspiration. Later, Roncalli would edit the letters of Saint Charles Borromeo, who, as the Cardinal archbishop of nearby Milan, had been a driving force behind the Tridentine reforms. In hindsight, it is clear that these formative early experiences planted the seeds for the Second Vatican Council.

From Bergamo, Roncalli went to Rome, where he served in the Propagation of the Faith, and then in foreign posts: as apostolic visitor to Bulgaria, where he was stationed for ten years, and then to a more challenging post in Istanbul, where



he developed close bonds with people of many different races and religions. After World War II, Pope Pius XII entrusted him with the delicate task of serving as nuncio to France following the long Nazi occupation. Roncalli's keen intelligence, diplomatic tact, compassion, and humor helped to rebuild a Church that was bitterly divided. Then, at the age of seventy-one, Roncalli was finally called home to Italy to become the Patriarch of Venice. He felt sure this would be his last assignment, but it was not. To his own great surprise, he was elected Pope on October 28, 1958. He was 78, and both the Cardinals who elected him and the media thought of him as a "transitional" figure, who would carry things forward without making waves.

But John proved to be anything but a transitional figure. The surprises began right away. When asked by what name he would be called as Pope, Roncalli answered, "John," a name that had not been used by any Pope since the thirteenth century, since the last person to bear it was the anti-Pope John XXIII. When the Cardinals asked him why he had chosen this name, the new Pope said "he had called himself John in order to renew the exhortation of the Apostle John: 'My children, love one another'" (Hebblethwaite). Pope John chose November 4 – the feast of St. Charles Borromeo – for his enthronement in the Chair of Peter. The Council was already in his thoughts as he began his ministry, and there were many more surprises to come in the months ahead.

*Corinna Laughlin, Director of Liturgy*

*For further reading: Hebblethwaite, Peter. John XXIII: Pope of the Century. Continuum, 2000.*