St. Pope John XXIII

**Humble Beginnings**

Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was born November 25, 1881, to humble beginnings. He came from Sotto il Monte, a small village in the foothills of the Alps in northern Italy. The fourth of fourteen children, Roncalli was the son of a tenant farmer who worked land owned by wealthy families, giving them half his crop in return as payment. His family was poor but generous. If a beggar passed by, he later recalled, ''There was always room for him and my mother would hasten to seat the stranger alongside us.''

**Priesthood and Early Career**

Roncalli was a bright student who entered the local seminary in 1892, and eventually won a scholarship to study in Rome. Once ordained, he became secretary to the Bishop of Bergamo, a pastoral and more liberal member of the hierarchy. He deeply influenced Roncalli, who called him ''My spiritual father.''

After serving Bergamo, and a brief stint serving in the Italian army as a hospital orderly and chaplain during World War I, Roncalli was chosen to be the head of the *Propaganda Fide*, a society that funded Catholic missions that had branches all over Europe.

**Diplomatic Service and Venice**

Roncalli was made an archbishop and sent to be the Vatican's representative in Bulgaria in 1925. The diplomatic posting had little prestige as Bulgaria was a relative backwater with few Catholics. In 1934, he was named delegate to both Turkey and Greece, two nations that also had small Catholic populations relative to their respective Muslim and Greek Orthodox majorities.

In these postings, Roncalli built a reputation for his ecumenical outreach, pastoral ministry, jovial attitude, and care for others. During World War II, he spent most of the time in Istanbul, working with the Red Cross to provide relief, and helping to coordinate paperwork that helped thousands of Jews escape the Holocaust to Palestine. As he wrote around that time, ''I live in the exercise of charity, charity for all.''

In recognition of his talents, in 1944, Roncalli was sent to Paris to help smooth over the fraught politics at play in a city only recently liberated by the Allies from German Nazis. Roncalli built a reputation for being friendly, engaging, and fair. In 1953, he was named Patriarch of Venice and made a Cardinal.

**Election to Pope**

In October 1958, a conclave was held to elect a new pope following Pope Pius XII's passing. Roncalli was no insider, and was, by that point, at the advanced age of seventy-six. He was not the favorite to take Pope Pius XII's place, but he was well-liked and had no enemies. After eleven votes, the outsider who had spent years in Catholic backwaters procured the two-thirds support needed to become pope, and subsequently chose the name John XXIII.

**Papal Achievements**

Whereas his predecessor was skinny and dignified, John was short, squat, less formal, and far more easygoing. He was largely humble, prayerful, and quick to make a joke to lighten the mood.

On January 25, 1959, he gave the announcement that he wanted to convene a church council, a decision that took the Catholic Church, and indeed the world, by surprise. This ultimately led to the start of the Second Vatican Council, better known as Vatican II, in October 1962. The Council, which would run several sessions and last until 1965, conducted important meetings that resulted in the Catholic Church updating many of its teachings, or *aggiornamento* (''updating'' or ''modernizing''), and taking a more conciliatory stance towards the modern world.

Pope John XXIII helped set the tone with his embracement of the idea of aggiornamento, Italian for ''updating'' or ''modernizing,'' so that the Church would be more positive and forward-looking than in previous decades.

While Vatican II was Pope John XXIII's most important act as Pope, he also wrote an important encyclical, or teaching document, *Pacem in terris* (''Peace on Earth'') in 1963, which argued for nuclear non-proliferation, and urged nations to work towards world peace.

Pope John XXIII was exceptionally popular among both Catholics and non-Catholics, and, as a result, was named Time magazine's ''Man of the Year'' in 1962.

**Death and Canonization**

Pope John XXIII would not live to see the full fruits of the council he had set in motion. He died from stomach cancer on June 3, 1963. Catholics and non-Catholics alike grieved the passing of Il Buono Papa, the ''Good Pope.'' He was canonized (declared a saint) by Pope Francis on April 27, 2014.

**Notable Quotes**

Pope John XXIII was well-known for his quick wit and sense of humor, as shown in the following quotes:

* A reporter once asked, ''How many people work in the Vatican?'' Pope John XXIII replied, ''About half of them.''
* While visiting a hospital, Pope John XXIII asked a small boy what he wanted to be when he grew up. The boy answered, ''Either a policeman or a Pope.'' The Pope replied, ''I would go in for the police if I were you. Anyone can become Pope, look at me!''
* Once, in conversation with a wealthy city official while he was in Venice, Pope John XXIII pointed out, ''You and I have one thing in common: money. You have a lot and I have nothing at all. The difference is I don't care about it.''
* And finally, ''Without a touch of holy madness the Church cannot grow.''

**A Gentle Revolutionary**

As one theologian described him, Pope John XXIII, the doughy, squat, kind man who was always ready with a joke, was a ''gentle revolutionary.''

After John XXIII's death, while the Second Vatican Council was still in progress, Belgian Cardinal Lèon Joseph Suenens, a close friend and ally of the now-deceased pope, planned a speech for the council floor in which he would ask that John XXIII be declared a saint immediately ''by acclamation.'' This would have bypassed the lengthy formal process of becoming a saint. But ultimately his plan was stymied by more conservative officials in the church. John XXIII's sainthood would have to wait. His cause for canonization, to officially become a saint, was opened by his successor, Pope Pius XII in November of 1965 as the Second Vatican Council drew to a close.

**A First Miracle**

To become a saint, according to church law, one must have two miracles officially attributed to him or her. The first for John XXIII's case for canonization came three years after his death. In May 1966, Sister Caterina Capitani was suffering from a cancerous stomach tumor. While the tumor was removed in surgery, Capitani's health continued to deteriorate. After praying to John XXIII, however, she miraculously recovered. As Sister Adele Labianca, who was caring for Capitani at the time, later remarked in no uncertain terms, ''It was a miracle,'' going on to add, ''Not only was it a physical healing but an internal healing when you could feel the presence of God.'' A followup medical commission could find no scientific rationale for Capitani's unexpected turnaround.

As a result of this first miracle, John XXIII was beatified, the second to last step before becoming a saint, by Pope John Paul II on September 3, 2000.

**Changing the Rules**

Typically, one miracle is required for someone to become beatified, and a second is needed then to become canonized as a saint. But Pope Francis approved John XXIII's sainthood without waiting for a second miracle. While unusual, the move was well within the pope's authority to dispense with certain requirements.

The decision led to some fierce debate and particularly some criticism by more conservative voices in the church who felt Francis was unfairly expediting John XXIII's cause for sainthood. But as one Italian Vatican observer remarked at the time regarding Francis's decision, ''He wanted to make someone he really likes a saint,'' and Francis indeed was a proponent of John XXIII's, including his pastoral attitude and reformist legacy.

Further, Francis's decision to waive John XXIII's second miracle came at about the same time Francis had certified the second miracle for Pope John Paul II, allowing him to proclaim both popes at the same time. Many saw it as an act of balance as John XXIII was favored by more liberal wings of the church, and John Paul II by more conservative Catholics. It was the first joint canonization proclamation of former popes in the Catholic Church's 2,000 years of history.

Name Period

St. Pope John XXIII

**Directions:** Answer the following questions.

1. What is St. Pope John XXIII’s birth name?
2. What is the *Propaganda Fide*? How was St. Pope John XXIII involved in the society?
3. What did St. Pope John XXIII do as the delegate to Turkey and Greece?
4. Who called and what were the general results of Vatican II?
5. What did *Pacem in terris* argue?
6. What was St. Pope John XXIII endearing nickname? Give one reason why he was given this nickname.
7. Who declared St. Pope John XXIII a saint? What was unique about his canonization?
8. What are the requirements to become a saint?
9. Explain the first miracle attributed to St. Pope John XXIII.
10. Who else was canonized on the same day as St. Pope John XXIII?