



# The Holy See

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## BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

**JOHN XXIII**  
**(1881-1963)**

ANGELO GIUSEPPE RONCALLI was born in Sotto il Monte, in the Diocese and Province of Bergamo, on 25 November 1881. The fourth of thirteen children, he was baptized that same day. Under the guidance of an outstanding parish priest, Father Francesco Rebuzzini, he received a profound ecclesiastical formation which would sustain him in difficulty and inspire him in the works of the apostolate.

He received Confirmation and First Communion in 1889 and entered the Seminary of Bergamo in 1892, where he remained for studies in classics and theology until his second year of theology. As a fourteen-year-old boy, he began drawing up the spiritual notes which he would keep in various ways until his death, and would later be collected in the *Journal of a Soul*. It was there that he began the practice of regular spiritual direction. On 1 March 1896, the spiritual director of the Seminary of Bergamo, Father Luigi Isacchi, enrolled him in the Secular Franciscan Order, whose Rule he professed on 23 May 1897.

From 1901 to 1905 he studied at the Pontifical Roman Seminary, where he benefited from a scholarship of the Diocese of Bergamo for qualified seminarians. In the meantime he completed a year of military service. He was ordained a priest in Rome on 10 August 1904 in the Church of Santa Maria in Monte Santo in Piazza del Popolo. In 1905, he was named secretary to the new Bishop of Bergamo, the Most Reverend Giacomo Maria Radini Tedeschi. He served as secretary until 1914, accompanying the Bishop on his pastoral visits and taking part in his numerous pastoral initiatives, including a Synod, the editorship of the monthly journal *La Vita Diocesana*, pilgrimages and various social works. He also taught history, patrology and apologetics in the Seminary. In 1910, when the statutes of Catholic Action were revised, the Bishop entrusted him

with the pastoral care of Catholic women (section V). He wrote for Bergamo's daily Catholic newspaper, and he was a diligent, profound and effective preacher.

These were the years of his profound contact with sainted Bishops: Saint Charles Borromeo (whose *Atti della Visita Apostolica*, completed in Bergamo in 1575 he would later publish), Saint Francis de Sales and Blessed Gregorio Barbarigo. They were also years of great pastoral activity at the side of Bishop Radini Tedeschi. When the latter died in 1914, Father Roncalli continued his priestly ministry as a seminary professor and a spiritual assistant to various ecclesiastical associations.

When Italy entered the war in 1915, he was called to military service as a sergeant medic. A year later, he became a military chaplain serving military hospitals behind the lines, and coordinated the spiritual and moral care of soldiers. At the end of the war he opened a "Home for Students" and served as a chaplain for students.

In 1919, he was appointed spiritual director of the Seminary. 1921 marked the beginning of the second phase of his life: his service to the Holy See. Called to Rome by Pope Benedict XV to be the President for Italy of the central council of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, he visited many Italian dioceses and organized missionary circles. In 1925 Pope Pius XI named him Apostolic Visitor to Bulgaria, elevating him to the episcopal dignity with the titular see of Areopolis. He chose as his episcopal motto *Oboedientia et Pax*, which served as the programme of his life.

Ordained bishop in Rome on 19 March 1925, he arrived in Sophia on 25 April. Subsequently named the first Apostolic Delegate to Bulgaria, Archbishop Roncalli remained there until 1934, visiting the Catholic communities and fostering respectful relations with other Christian communities. He was present and offered ready charitable assistance during the earthquake of 1928. He quietly endured misunderstandings and the difficulties of a ministry marked by halting progress. He grew in self-knowledge and confidence, and in abandonment to Christ crucified.

On 27 November 1934, he was named Apostolic Delegate in Turkey and Greece. His new assignment covered a vast area. The Catholic Church was present in many ways throughout the young Turkish Republic which was in the process of renewing and organizing itself. His ministry to Catholics was demanding and he became known for his respectful manner and dialogue with the Orthodox and Muslims. At the outbreak of the Second World War he was in Greece, which was devastated by fighting. He sought to gain information about prisoners of war and he helped to save many Jews by giving them transit visas issued by the Apostolic Delegation. On 6 December 1944, he was appointed Apostolic Nuncio in Paris by Pope Pius XII.

During the final months of the war and the first months of peace, Archbishop Roncalli assisted prisoners of war and worked to restore stability to the life of the Church in France. He visited the French shrines and participated in popular feasts and more significant religious events. He was

attentive, prudent and trusting in his approach to the new pastoral initiatives undertaken by bishops and priests in France. He constantly sought to embody evangelical simplicity, even in dealing with the most complex diplomatic issues. His pastoral desire to be a priest in every situation sustained him. His deep piety found daily expression in prolonged moments of prayer and meditation.

On 12 January 1953 he was created Cardinal and on 25 January he was named Patriarch of Venice. He was delighted to devote himself in the last years of his life to a directly pastoral ministry, an aspiration he had always cherished as a priest. He was a wise and resourceful pastor, following in the footsteps of the holy Bishops whom he had always venerated: Saint Lawrence Giustiniani, the first Patriarch of Venice, and Saint Pius X. As he grew older, his trust in the Lord increased, within the context of an active, enterprising and joyful ministry.

Following the death of Pius XII, he was elected Pope on 28 October 1958, taking the name John XXIII. In the five years of his pontificate he appeared to the world as an authentic image of the Good Shepherd. Meek and gentle, resourceful and courageous, simple and ever active, he undertook various corporal and spiritual works of mercy, visiting prisoners and the sick, welcoming people of all nations and religions, demonstrating an exquisite sense of fatherhood to everyone. His social magisterium was contained in the Encyclicals *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in terris* (1963).

He convoked the Synod of Rome, instituted the Commission for the Revision of the Code of Canon Law, and convened the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. As Bishop of Rome, he visited parishes and churches in the historical centre and in the outskirts. People saw in him a reflection of *benignitas evangelica* and called him the "good Pope". A profound spirit of prayer sustained him. He embodied, as the driving force behind a movement of renewal of the Church, the peace of one who trusts completely in the Lord. He advanced resolutely along the paths of evangelization, ecumenism and dialogue, and showed a paternal concern to reach out to those of his children most in need.

He died the evening of 3 June 1963, the day after Pentecost, in a profound spirit of abandonment to Jesus, of longing for his embrace, and surrounded by the prayers of the entire world, which seemed to gathered at his bedside to breathe with him the love of the Father.

John XXIII was declared Blessed by Pope John Paul II on 3 September 2000 in Saint Peter's Square, during the celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

He was canonised on 27 April 2014 by Pope Francis.

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