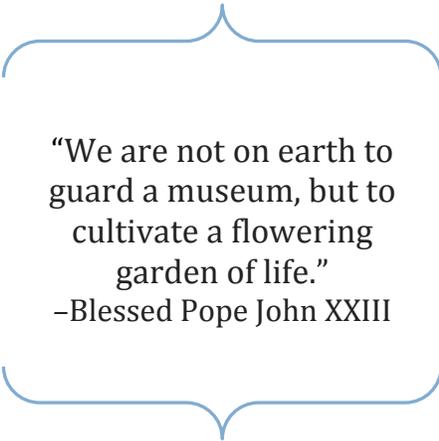

BLESSED POPE JOHN XXIII

The eldest son in a family of thirteen children, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was born November 25, 1881. The Roncallis were poor sharecroppers from Sotto il Monte, northern Italy. Angelo, who later recalled always wanting to be a priest, entered seminary at the age of ten and was ordained in Rome in 1904.

Roncalli served a decade as secretary to the bishop of Bergamo, a diocese known for its socially engaged Catholicism. Drafted into the Italian army during World War I, he was an orderly and a chaplain. Afterward, Roncalli entered the Vatican bureaucracy, was consecrated an archbishop in 1925 and spent twenty years as a Vatican diplomat. He had no diplomatic training, but intuitively knew how to combine disarming goodwill with subtle negotiation. He also helped save thousands of Jews from the Holocaust by authorizing reams of fake baptismal certificates. In 1944, Roncalli became nuncio to France, then the most prestigious Vatican foreign service post.



“We are not on earth to guard a museum, but to cultivate a flowering garden of life.”
–Blessed Pope John XXIII

Roncalli did not live in Italy again until 1953 as Cardinal of Venice. A hardworking but unassuming pastor, he had little reputation outside of Italian and diplomatic circles. So it was a surprise when, at the conclave following the death of Pope Pius XII in October 1958, Roncalli emerged the winner.

Conventional wisdom held that Roncalli would be a mere placeholder, but within his first hundred days in office, Pope John XXIII embarked on a revolution. Visiting St. Paul’s Basilica in Rome on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, he astonished his audience by summoning an ecumenical council. Councils were no longer expected. The First Vatican Council had effectively neutered any governing role for the bishops by declaring papal infallibility in 1870. But John, who claimed inspiration from the Holy Spirit, sensed that the Catholic Church needed a collective *aggiornamento* (“updating”). It needed a renewal of its internal life and a reassessment of its place in the world.

In four sessions between 1962 and 1965, the Second Vatican Council debated and issued a series of decrees on liturgy, religious dialogue, the media, social justice, and the mission of the church as the people of God. These teaching documents, in many respects open-ended, famously departed from the historic council style of defining or condemning theological propositions. They opened Catholicism to engagement with the hopes and struggles of the times. “Good Pope John” only survived the first session, dying of cancer on June 3, 1963. Pope John Paul II declared him “blessed,” one step below the title of saint. His feast day, October 11, is the anniversary of the council’s opening in 1962.

PRAY

Divine Spirit, renew your wonders in our time, as though for a new Pentecost, and grant that the holy church, preserving unanimous and continuous prayer, together with Mary the Mother of Jesus, and also under the guidance of St. Peter, may increase the reign of the Divine Savior, the reign of truth and justice, the reign of love and peace. Amen.

–Prayer of Pope John XXIII to the Holy Spirit, 1961