

# **Pope John XXIII: His Life and Legacy**

**Charles E. Curran, STD**  
**The Bishop John McCarthy Lecture**  
**St. Edwards University, Austin, Texas**  
**October 18, 2007**



**Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli**  
**1881-1963**

**Pope John XXIII**  
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## **CALL TO ACTION**

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**Full Remarks – Charles Curran, STD  
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It is an honor and a privilege to be invited to give the Bishop John McCarthy Lecture here at St. Edward's University in Austin. I first met John McCarthy when he was working with the late Msgr. George Higgins in Washington on social justice issues. Like so many others, we both learned much from our late friend, George. In light of these common interests, my first thought was to address the issue of the social mission of the church in this lecture tonight. But then I thought about what seems to be the most significant contribution of Bishop McCarthy to the life of the Catholic Church in the United States. He prided himself on being a "Vatican II bishop." In this light a more appropriate topic tonight is a reflection on the life and legacy of Pope John XXIII who gave us Vatican II.

As a newly ordained student priest, I was in St. Peter's Square on the late afternoon of Tuesday, October 28, 1958, the third day of the conclave to elect a new pope. This was the fifth time that crowds came to the square to see if the white smoke from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel would signal that a new pope had been elected. In the previous four times it was at first difficult to discern what was the color of the smoke. Even that late afternoon it was hard to discern whether the smoke was white or black, but the fact that other lights went on immediately after the smoke indicated that we had a new pope. It was early evening before the announcement was made from the balcony of St. Peter's overlooking the huge square that the new pope was Angelo

Giuseppe Roncalli who will be called John XXIII. The new pope came out to bless the crowd. To be honest, I was disappointed. Pius XII was a thin, ascetic figure with a noble Roman nose who piously made the threefold sign of the cross over the crowd lifting his eyes to heaven. John XXIII was a roly-poly man who before he even finished the blessing started waving to the crowd.

### **Legacy of Vatican II**

Those more knowledgeable than I pointed out that this would be an interim and caretaker papacy. John was 76 years old. His papacy would be short and quite conventional. Yes, his papacy was short—he died less than five years later on June 3, 1963. But how wrong we all were. John XXIII was not a caretaker pope. He gave us Vatican II which has had such a tremendous influence on the life of the Catholic Church. Vatican II, which began in 1962 and lasted for four sessions ending in 1965, constitutes his legacy. The first section of this lecture will discuss the great contributions of Vatican II.

Two significant characteristics mark the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church—triumphalism from a theological perspective and classicism from a philosophical perspective. In the triumphalistic understanding, the Catholic Church is perfect, holy, and without spot. In the theses of the theology I studied in Rome in the pre-Vatican II period the Catholic Church is the kingdom of God founded by Jesus Christ on Peter and the Apostles. The church has all the answers. From the Reformation through the Enlightenment and into the twentieth century the Catholic Church condemned the religious, philosophical, and political errors of the times.

Classicism is a philosophical perspective which emphasizes the eternal, the immutable, and the unchanging. We have the truth. There is no need to change anything. Classicism is contrasted with historical consciousness and recognizes change and development with both continuity and discontinuity. Bernard Lonergan, the Canadian theologian who taught me in Rome in the pre-Vatican II period, rightly pointed out that the shift from classicism to historical consciousness explains what happened at Vatican II.

John's opening speech to Vatican II on October 11, 1962, explained his general approach to the Council, but at that time neither he nor anyone else had any understanding of what the Council would do or even how long it would take. Three points stand out. First, there were to be no condemnations. "The Church has always opposed these errors. Frequently she has condemned them with the greatest severity. Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations."

Second, the purpose of the Council was *aggiornamento*—bringing the church up to date. Note here the whole historical consciousness aspect. "Illuminated by the light of this Council, the Church—we confidently trust—will become greater in spiritual riches and, gaining the strength of new energies there from, she will look to the future without fear. In fact, by bringing herself up to date where required and by the wise organization

of mutual cooperation, the Church will make men, families, and peoples really turn their minds to heavenly things.”

“(I)t is necessary first of all that the Church should never depart from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the Fathers. But at the same time she must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate.”

“(T)he Christian, Catholic, and apostolic spirit of the whole world expects a step forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciousness in faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of the faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a magisterium which is predominantly pastoral.”

The third point was the strong disagreement with the “prophets of gloom.” “In the daily exercise of our pastoral office, we sometimes have to listen, much to our regret, to voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure. In these modern times they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin. They say that our era, in comparison with past eras, is getting worse, and they behave as though they had learned nothing from history, which is,

nonetheless, the teacher of life. They behave as though at the time of former Councils everything was a full triumph for the Christian idea and life and for proper religious liberty. We feel we must disagree with these prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand.”

A brief summary of the significant documents of Vatican II shows the deep and significant changes brought about by the Council without, however, changing the basic faith of the church. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy emphasized the active participation of all in the liturgy based on the baptismal gift of the priesthood of all believers and illustrated in the use of the vernacular languages. The Word of God, the Scripture, now plays a much greater role in the liturgy bringing together the two aspects of Word and sacrament. Jesus is present not only in the bread and wine but also in the Word and in the community of the disciples gathered together around the Eucharistic table.

The Constitution on the Church taught that the church is the whole people of God and not just the hierarchy. All Christians by reason of their baptism are called to holiness. The church is a pilgrim church always in need of reform and never perfect.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World recognized the legitimate autonomy of all earthly realities. The church works together with all people of good will to bring about greater peace and justice in our world. The church is in dialogue with the modern world and thus at times can learn from the world and others.

The Declaration on Religious Liberty brought about a dramatic change by asserting religious freedom for all based on the dignity of the human person and the limits of democratic government. The earlier position denied religious liberty on the basis that error has no rights.

The Decree on Ecumenism insisted on the role of dialogue with other Christians and not condemnations. The true church subsists in the Catholic Church. To this day there is still much controversy about the precise meaning of the Council's statement on this matter. With regard to Jews, the Council repudiated any understanding that the Jewish people were guilty of deicide in the killing of Jesus. Likewise the Council recognized the continuing role of the covenant with the Jewish people and did not claim that this covenant ceased to exist with the new covenant.

In his broader dealings with the world, John also applied his emphasis on dialogue. The Catholic Church has strongly opposed Marxism and Communism in all its forms, but in his 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in terris*, John XXIII cautiously broke with this approach. John distinguished between false philosophical teachings about human origins and the universe and movements which have a direct bearing on social, cultural, and economic issues even if these movements have their origin and inspiration in false tenets. As a result the encyclical claims "it can at times happen that meetings for the attainment of some practical results which previously seemed completely useless now are either

actually useful or may be looked upon as profitable for the future” (par. 160). His call for peace based on truth, justice, love, and freedom was well received in the modern world.

In addition, John’s personality greatly contributed to his reputation. He was a simply, holy, humble man who came across as everybody’s grandfather. Thus, for all these reasons, John XXIII was the most significant and important Catholic figure in the twentieth century. There is no doubt that for many of us Catholics he is a model, a hero, and a saint.

### **Another Legacy**

The second part of this lecture will develop another important reason why Pope John XXIII is a hero, a model, and an exemplar for us Catholic Christians today. Many people today think of John XXIII as having from the very beginning a clear understanding of exactly what he wanted the Council to do and to achieve. I disagree. I do not think that John had a clear idea at all of what the Council would be when he called it. He did not have all the answers. John’s ultimate greatness was the fact that he grew. He was open, he listened, and he learned. And it is precisely in this way that he is truly a model for all of us Catholic Christians today.

Here I have to make a few scholarly disclaimers. I am not an historian. Others have studied Vatican II and the life of John XXIII in great depth and in a very scholarly manner. My approach is somewhat influenced by my own personal experience but also relies on the work of other scholars especially a fascinating article by the French Jesuit

theologian, Robert Rouquette, that appeared in the July-August 1963 issue of *Études*, the French Jesuit monthly publication of culture, art, and theology.

Roncalli had been the papal nuncio in Paris from 1944 to 1953. Rouquette, as a well known theologian and commentator on the French church, was acquainted with Roncalli and his work in France. Rouquette also later covered the Vatican Council for *Études* and was a strong supporter of the changes brought about by Vatican II.

Rouquette's 1963 article appeared just after the death of John XXIII in June 1963. Rouquette in that article worries about a cult of personality about John XXIII. There is the danger of making him a saint of heroic perfection and genius. John XXIII like all of us was a human being with human frailties and problems. He was not an angel. Yes, he was a holy and intelligent man who made an unparalleled contribution to the life of the Catholic Church, but he was not perfect.

Rouquette's article is entitled, "Le Mystère Roncalli." The basic thesis of the article is there was nothing in what Rouquette saw in France in those nine years that indicated Roncalli was anything more than a conventional and conservative Catholic churchman. Rouquette reports that before the 1958 papal election he heard one French cardinal say that one thing for sure was that it will not be Roncalli. One of the best French bishops, remarkable for his intelligence and character, who unfortunately died too young, cried when he heard that Roncalli was elected pope. This background explains

why Rouquette was happily surprised by what Roncalli did as pope, especially with regard to Vatican II.

A brief overview of Roncalli's life also shows few signs of what he would do during the short five years of his papacy. He was born on November 25, 1881, in Sotto il Monte, Bergamo, Italy, the third of thirteen children of pious Catholic parents. He studied for the priesthood, served in the army, earned a doctorate in theology, and was ordained a priest in 1904 for the Diocese of Bergamo. He served as secretary to the Bishop of Bergamo, taught in the seminary, published a few brief historical monographs as well as a laudatory biography of his bishop, and worked with youth. In 1921, Pope Benedict XV named him Director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Italy. In 1925, he was appointed apostolic visitor to Bulgaria and made an archbishop. Only 40,000 Latin Rite Catholics and 4,000 Eastern Rite Catholics lived in Bulgaria. Peter Hebblethwaite, in his biography of John XXIII, entitles this particular chapter "Ten Hard Years in Bulgaria." Roncalli was blamed for poorly handling the marriage of the Orthodox King Boris of Bulgaria to the daughter of King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy. Boris, an Orthodox Christian, agreed with Roncalli to marry her in a Catholic ceremony in Italy but then broke his promise and had a large public Orthodox wedding back in Bulgaria.

In 1934, Roncalli became the apostolic delegate to Turkey and Greece. Both of these countries had very few Catholics. In terms of the Vatican diplomatic corps this assignment was on the bottom rung, but Roncalli did make contacts with Muslim culture

and also some relationships with the Orthodox Church. Since he had never attended the Ecclesiastical Academy where the top Vatican diplomats had been trained, Roncalli realized in his own words that he was a donkey and not a horse (Hebblethwaite 97). But in 1944, Pope Pius XII appointed Roncalli the apostolic nuncio to Paris, probably the most prestigious Vatican diplomatic post. But herein lies a story.

Pius XII wanted to send Archbishop Valerio Valeri as nuncio to Paris. Charles de Gaulle refused to accept him as the Vatican nuncio to the new French government because he had been nuncio to the collaborationist regime in Vichy. For months the impasse continued and neither de Gaulle nor Pius XII budged. On January 1, according to protocol, the papal nuncio, as the dean of the French diplomatic corps., was to present New Years greetings to the French head of state. If there were no Vatican nuncio, the next diplomat in line was the Russian ambassador, which from the perspective of Pius XII would have been a disaster. So Pius XII blinked! On December 5 Roncalli received a telegram from the Vatican appointing him nuncio to Paris. Yes, Pius XII had lost his battle with de Gaulle, but he would snub de Gualle by sending him one of the lowest ranking Vatican diplomats.

Hebblethwaite entitles the chapter on Roncalli's time in Paris, "Difficult Mission to Paris." Roncalli proved himself quite adroit in his dealings with the French government, but he was less successful with regard to the French church as already indicated by Rouquette's comments. Roncalli's time in France corresponded with a rise of intellectual, theological, and pastoral renewal of the French church. Cardinal

Emmanuel Suhard of Paris and others recognized that the French working class was estranged from the church. France which used to send missionaries all over the world now was itself a mission country. The church needed to evangelize the de-Christianized populace and overcome the wall separating the church from the modern world. Suhard's writings attracted worldwide attention with the English translation of *Growth or Decline? The Church Today* going through five editions from Fides Publishers in the United States. The priest worker movement grew out of this approach as priests moved out of rectories and worked side by side with other workers in an attempt to evangelize the working class. On the theological front Jesuits, especially in Lyons, and Dominicans, especially at the faculty of Le Saulchoir, were adopting more historically conscious theological methodologies and moving away from the pre-Vatican II neo-Scholasticism.

The reaction of the Vatican to these developments was quite negative, and Roncalli as nuncio was seen as the eyes and ears of the Vatican. Pope Pius XII was upset with the leading role played by Suhard in trying to shape the mission of the church throughout the world. Suhard himself never really trusted Roncalli. The strongest and most public Vatican action came with the 1950 encyclical, *Humani generis*, which condemned the "*nouvelle theologie*" that had been developing in France. No names were mentioned in the encyclical but Jesuit theologians such as Henri de Lubac, Henri Rondet, and Henri Bouillard lost their teaching positions as did the Dominicans, Marie-Dominique Chenu and Yves Congar. In 1953, Pope Pius XII summarily removed the provincials of the three French Dominican provinces. In 1953-54, the Vatican intervened to stop the experiment of the worker priests.

One can well understand why the progressive French bishops and theologians were not happy with the papal election of Roncalli a few years later. Perhaps he did learn something from the French experience but he was identified with the opposition to everything that was taking place in France.

In January 1953, Pius XII made Roncalli a cardinal and appointed him Archbishop of Venice. Again there was nothing in Venice that indicated what later occurred at Vatican II. Roncalli held a diocesan synod in November 1957, but there was no debate or discussion, only the acceptance of previously written documents which did not bring about any real change.

After his election as pope, John surprised practically everyone by announcing on January 25, 1959, three major undertakings for the life of the church—a diocesan synod for Rome, an ecumenical council for the universal church, and the revision of the Code of Canon Law. I was doing my doctoral studies in Rome at that time and like everyone else was looking for clues about what John had in mind.

The Roman Synod was held in January 1960. In my view it was a disaster and merely confirmed existing understandings and practices. The sympathetic biographer of John XXIII, Peter Hebblethwaite, pointed out the only function of the members of the Synod (the priests of Rome) was to applaud the prepackaged 755 articles that were read

to them. The Synod's detailed provisions did not suggest the rustle of a new Pentacost (178).

John XXIII had made his alma mater the Lateran University a full-fledged pontifical university. Its leadership and faculty were quite conservative, clearly associated with the Roman Curia, and determined to play a leading role in Catholic theology. In late 1960, Msgr. Antonio Romeo of the Lateran, in its publication *Divinitas*, launched a strong and intemperate attack on the Jesuit professors at the Pontifical Biblical Institute. Before I left Rome in June 1961 to begin teaching at St. Bernard's Seminary in Rochester, New York, my teacher and friend, Fr. Francis X. Murphy took me out to lunch. Murphy regaled me with stories about the shenanigans of the Roman Curia and their attempt to make sure the Council did nothing new. Many of these stories appeared in the famous "Letter from Vatican City" published in the fall of 1962 at the beginning of the Council in the *New Yorker*. The article was signed by Xavier Rynne (Murphy's mother's maiden name), but years later he admitted he was the true author.

I was not in Rome after June of 1961 but what I heard and read while teaching at St. Bernard's was not encouraging for the future of the Council. In February 1962, John issued the apostolic constitution, *Veterum sapientia*, praising Latin as the official language of the church and calling for all seminary professors throughout the world to teach philosophy and theology in Latin. The document also urged all bishops to see that none of their subjects "eager for novelties" write against the use of Latin either in teaching the sacred disciplines or in the liturgy. This was certainly a blow for those of us

who hoped there might be the use of some vernacular in the liturgy coming from the forthcoming council. Later in 1962, two of the Jesuit professors at the Biblical Institute—Stanislas Lyonnet and Maximilian Zerwick—who had been attacked earlier by Romeo were suspended from their teaching. I also found out that my teacher of moral theology at the Gregorian, Josef Fuchs, was not allowed to teach seminarians. In August 1962, the Holy Office under Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani issued a *monitum* (warning) about the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ. The signs coming from Rome were ominous. The Council was apparently not going to be a vehicle for reform or change in the church.

Meanwhile the actual work of preparing for the Council began. Pope John himself made the decision that the Central Theological Commission and the ten sub-commissions which would write the preparatory documents would be presided over by the curial cardinal who headed the corresponding congregation in the curia. Thus, Cardinal Ottaviani, the head of the Holy Office, presided over the Central Theological Commission. The preparation of the documents for the Council was firmly in the hands of the Roman Curia which was known for its very conservative views. According to Hebblethwaite, the pope worked very closely with the curia in preparing for the Council. He read all the proposed documents, annotated them, and commented on them. He publicly and lavishly praised the proposed texts as the work of magnificent, edifying, and most devoted hard work. At the end of the fifth session of the Central Commission in April 1962, Pope John maintained that the consent of the bishops will not be difficult to attain for these documents and their approval will be unanimous(Hebblethwaite, 207-

212). The general feeling was that the work of the Council would be finished in one session.

The reality was completely different. The bishops of the world in the Council rejected all the preparatory texts except for the one on the liturgy. The liturgical sub-commission had a much broader membership including most of the outstanding European liturgical scholars. Only during the first session of the Council did it become clear that the majority of the Council fathers would reject the preparatory documents. As a result, the Council ultimately needed four sessions to rewrite and approve its own documents.

A “progressive myth” developed that in having the curia prepare the documents for the Council, and even in his own seemingly enthusiastic support of these documents, Pope John was using his peasant shrewdness to outmaneuver the curia. Hebblethwaite rightly rejects this thesis. John was convinced that the curia people had produced good working documents that would be ultimately approved by the upcoming Council.

What I have just presented is by definition a one-sided picture of Angelo Roncalli. My purpose was to prove the thesis that Roncalli, when he called the Council and even at its very beginning, had no clear idea of the changes that Vatican II ultimately brought about. In a sense the results of the Council were truly a surprise even for Roncalli. In the end, I think this fact points to his greatness and his being a role model for all of us. He was open to the call of the Spirit and, as a true pilgrim Christian, grew in wisdom, age, and grace before God and people. But this understanding raises the further question.

Why did he change? What was it about him that disposed him to be open to change and development?

### **Why Did John XXIII Change?**

As Christians we strongly believe in the grace and gift of the Holy Spirit. All of us are called to be sensitive to the Spirit and to try to discern what the Spirit is calling us to do. However, the role of the Spirit and the personal discernment of the Spirit are not always easy to fathom. There were other people at the Council and in the work preparing for it who did not grow and change in the same way as John XXIII. But there is no doubt that John himself clearly understood his call for the Council as an inspiration of the Holy Spirit. When John mentioned the Council to his secretary, Msgr. Loris Capovilla, he noticed the worried expression on his face. John said to him that you are fearful that the pope is too old for this venture. But you are far too cautious. “When we believe that an inspiration comes to us from the Holy Spirit, we must follow it: What happens after that is not our responsibility” (Suenens, 65). The Catholic tradition also recognizes that the divine works in and through the human. What was there about John XXIII that made him open to appreciate the need for reform in the church as ultimately found in Vatican II? Four factors come to mind.

First is his own personality. He was a warm person who was open to others and consequently learned from them. He was unpretentious and therefore willing to listen to what others had to say and offer. He was optimistic based on an optimism both of nature

and of grace so that he was not fearful of change. He was open in the best sense of the term. Recall how he strongly opposed the prophets of gloom.

Second, as mentioned earlier, he had an interest in history and wrote some historical works. Historical study reminds us that things have changed over time. An historical perspective helps open one's mind to recognize the need for ongoing development. In his talk at the opening of the Council (even then I do not think he had a clear idea of the reforms that Vatican II actually brought about) he insisted that history is the teacher of life but some people believe as if they have learned nothing from history.

Third, John had always understood the Council to be a pastoral council and not a dogmatic council. By definition the concept of pastoral is more flexible than dogmatic. John saw himself primarily as a pastor and not as a theologian or intellectual. Consequently, he was very open to what would make faith more deep and penetrating in the daily life of the Christian community and of all believers.

Fourth, John learned much from the advice and participation of a number of influential cardinals and bishops who were upset with the preparatory documents proposed by the curial dominated commissions. Among these people were Cardinal Bea whom John appointed as President of the Secretariat for Christian Unity and Cardinals Suenens (Belgium), Frings and Döpfner (Germany), Lénart (France), Alfrink (Holland), and Léger (Canada). Suenens had sent to the pope his own proposal for what he thought the Council should do and found that the pope was quite receptive to these ideas.

Suenens mentions the first meeting that the steering committee for the Council had with the pope. The meeting was quite informal and during it Suenens asked the pope why did you appoint the prefects of the Roman congregations to head the preparatory commissions. The pope laughed and said, “You’re quite right, but I didn’t have the courage” (Suenens, 71). Obviously, there were many other voices inside and outside the preparatory and actual work of the Council who were also calling for more substantial reform. There is no doubt that Pope John learned much from others.

In conclusion, Vatican II stands as the legacy of Pope John XXIII for the Catholic Church. But an equally important legacy and the reason why he is a role model for all of us comes from the fact that he was a pilgrim Christian who was always open to the Spirit and grew in wisdom, age, and grace before God and people.

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