

The Story of Blessed John XXIII



Entrance to Blessed John XXIII's birthplace in Bergamo, Italy.

This is the village of Sotto il Monte in Bergamo, Italy. In this quiet place Blessed Pope John XXIII learned his first lessons about love and service. Later, he would be sent to distant countries. His life would take many twists and turns. These twists and turns would make him ready to lead the Church at a key time in history.

When Pope John was born in 1881, his parents called him Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli. He was one of 13 children. His parents were farm laborers. They raised a strong and loving family on a small income. Angelo helped by working in the fields. Later he studied to become a priest.

After he had been ordained about ten years, World War I broke out. He served in the army, providing physical and spiritual help for the soldiers. He saw the many sufferings that were brought about by the war. At the end of the war, he was sent to Turkey, a country where people of different faiths had bitter disagreements. But he used his wisdom to help ease the tensions.

Then World War II started. He used all his skills to help those who were in danger. There were thousands of them. He saved many lives.

After the war, he was sent to Paris. During the war some people in France had sided with the Nazis, and there was still much anger in the country over this. So his wisdom was needed again. When things had settled down, he was assigned to be the bishop of the city of Venice, Italy. The people of his diocese felt so comfortable with him that they would knock at his door if they needed guidance. By this time he was becoming an old man. He expected to stay in Venice until he died. But God had other plans.

In 1958 Pope Pius XII died. The bishops gathered to elect a new pope, but at first they could not agree on a choice. They voted 12 times before selecting Cardinal Roncalli. He was as surprised as everyone else by this! But all that he had learned during his life was useful to him now.

Because of his memories of two world wars, he called on the nations of the world to work for peace. Because of all the arguments he had seen, he worked for understanding between Christians. To help the Church to deal with the challenges of the future, he called together the bishops from all over the world. Their gathering to pray and make decisions was called the Second Vatican Council, also called Vatican II.

In spite of the serious concerns he carried each day, to the end of his life Pope John remained a down-to-earth person who cared about others. As he was dying, he told his secretary, "When all this is over, be sure and go see your mother."



Blessed John XXIII's nephew poses before a portrait of his beloved uncle.