



The Good Pope and Vatican II:
A youth group session on Pope John XXIII
and the Second Vatican Council

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Pope John XXIII will be canonised on the 27th of April alongside Pope John Paul II. Pope John XXIII, who came to be known as “Good Pope John”, is one of the most beloved popes of modern times. He was responsible for initiating Vatican II, the council which helped the church respond to the changing world of the twentieth century and shaped the church we recognise today. This resource helps introduce young people to Pope John XXIII and Vatican II, and celebrates the life of a man who remains a joyful example of faith.

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Section one: The Good Pope

Part 1: Introduction to Pope John XXIII

Here are some suggestions for leading a brief talk on Pope John XXIII, which introduces his life and gives context to his teachings as Pope.

On April 27 we celebrate the canonisation of Pope John XXIII, one of the most beloved popes of modern times. While he may not be so familiar to the younger generation of Catholics, Pope John XXIII helped shape the church we experience today through initiating the Second Vatican Council. Before we explore Vatican II, we'll explore the life and virtues of Pope John XXIII which led him to be called "Good Pope John".

Early life

- Pope John XXIII was born Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli in 1881 in Bergamo, northern Italy.
- Angelo's family were farmers, and he had a simple village upbringing with his twelve siblings.
- When he was a teenager, Angelo decided he wanted to be a priest and entered the seminary (he entered the minor seminary aged 12!).

Priest

- Don ("Father" in Italian) Angelo was ordained to the priesthood in Rome in 1904 at age 23.
- He looked forward to living his life as a parish priest serving his home diocese.
- Don Angelo served as a bishop's secretary for 10 years, and also served as a chaplain in the Italian military during World War I, an experience which shaped his strong commitment to building peace.

Bishop

- At 40, Don Angelo was unexpectedly appointed as Apostolic Visitor to Bulgaria and made Archbishop. This role required him to care for the small Catholic population of predominantly Orthodox Bulgaria, a challenge which saw him encounter and form friendships with people of very different cultures and faiths.
- Following his appointment in Bulgaria, Archbishop Roncalli was sent to Turkey and Greece, where he remained during the Second World War, assisting prisoners of war and helping Jews fleeing from Europe. In 1944 Archbishop Roncalli was sent to Paris as Apostolic Nuncio.
- In 1953, at age 71, Archbishop Roncalli finally returned to Italy as the Patriarch (Bishop) of Venice, fulfilling his dream to be a shepherd who cares directly for the souls of people. He expected to live out the remainder of his life in Venice, and purchased a return train ticket to the 1958 papal conclave...

Pope and Vatican II

- Cardinal Roncalli was elected as Pope and Bishop of Rome in 1958 at age 77.
- He chose John as his pontifical name because it was his father's name, the name of his childhood parish, and the name of two saints close to Jesus (John the Baptist and John the Apostle).
- Pope John XXIII took his role as Bishop of Rome seriously, visiting parishes, hospitals and the prison around Rome regularly.
- He called for an ecumenical council in 1959, which he envisioned as a council to help renew the church to respond to modern times. He is reported to have said "I want to throw open the windows of the Church so that we can see out and the people can see in."

"We are not here on earth to look after a museum but to cultivate a flourishing garden of life..."

Pope John XXIII

- It took three years to prepare for Vatican II. On the evening of the council's opening, Pope John XXIII appeared on the balcony at St Peter's Basilica, and addressed the crowd gathered below: "When you head home, find your children. Hug and kiss your children and tell them: 'This is the hug and kiss of the Pope.' And when you find them with tears to dry, give them a good word. Give anyone who suffers a word of comfort. Tell them 'The Pope is with us especially in our times of sadness and bitterness.'" This impromptu speech became known as the "Sermon of the Moon".
- Pope John XXIII did not live to see the conclusion of Vatican II. He died from stomach cancer on 3 June 1963, aged 81, and was buried in the Vatican grottoes beneath St Peter's Basilica.

"Every parish is my family album."

Pope John XXIII

Part 2: The virtues of Pope John XXIII activity

Following the talk on Pope John XXIII's life, the group will move into a reflective activity. Introduce the activity as follows and then break into three groups. Each group will reflect on one of three virtues that Pope John XXIII is especially remembered for, and then return to share with other groups what they have discussed.

The legacy of Pope John XXIII is most vividly expressed in Vatican II – unlike other saints, his feast day is not celebrated on the date of his death, but instead it is celebrated on the anniversary of the opening of Vatican II (October 11).

But Pope John XXIII's canonisation is not just a celebration of his achievement in opening Vatican II. The canonisation of Pope John XXIII points to his holiness, something he aspired to grow in every day. From the time he was a teenager, he kept a spiritual journal called "Journal of a Soul" which describes his experiences of prayer, struggle and closeness to God.

We will explore three virtues Pope John XXIII embodies: peace, humility and joy.

A man of peace

Pope John XXIII's episcopal motto was "Oboedientia et pax": obedience and peace. Pope Francis has described Pope John's peacefulness as the outward sign of his obedient interior disposition, his "willingness to be led, like a child".

"I would like that a prayer for peace be my last as pope, as the humble Pope John."

Pope John XXIII,
written in his personal diary.

From the time he spent on the war fields of Italy in World War I praying with wounded and dying men, Pope John XXIII had a deep awareness of the oppression of war. His final encyclical (letter) as Pope, titled "Pacem in Terris" (Peace on Earth"), was written at the start of the Cold War and addressed to all people of goodwill. He emphasised that "Among all the good things of our lives and of our history, enjoyed by individuals, families, and peoples, peace is truly the most important and the most precious."

Pope John was committed to living this peace among people of other faiths. During World War II, Archbishop Roncalli helped thousands of Jews fleeing Europe through Greece and Turkey, and remained committed to Christian ecumenism.

Activity

As a group discuss the following:

- What is peace?
- What can I do to promote peace?

Challenge each member to think of one action that they can take to grow in peace and conclude with this short prayer for peace written by Pope John XXIII:

*Lord Jesus Christ,
who is called the Prince of Peace,
who is yourself our peace and reconciliation,
who so often said,
"Peace to you,"
grant us peace.
Make all men and women witnesses of truth,
justice, and brotherly love.
Banish from their hearts whatever might endanger peace.
Enlighten our rulers that they may guarantee
and defend the great gift of peace.
May all peoples of the earth become as brothers and sisters.
May longed-for peace blossom forth
and reign always over us all*

"There can be no peace between men unless there is peace within each one of them, unless, that is, each one builds up within himself the order wished by God."

Pacem in Terris.

A man of humility

Pope John XXIII always remembered his simple upbringing, and referred to himself as the son of a “humble but robust and honest labourer”. His deep love and respect for his father, who was a simple hardworking man, was reflected in his choice of the name John when he became pope.

When he was a little boy Pope John XXIII attended a religious ceremony with his father, who lifted him onto his shoulders so that young Angelo could see the procession. When he became pope and was carried in the papal chair, Pope John XXIII was reminded of this incident, and reflected often that the secret of life is to let yourself be carried by others to God.

This idea of “being led” stayed with him as pope. The night before Vatican II opened, he woke in the night, anxious about the historic occasion the coming day. He told himself: “Giovanni why don’t you sleep? Is it the Pope or the Holy Spirit who governs the church? It is the Holy Spirit, is it not? Well then, go to sleep Giovanni!” (The Wit and Wisdom of Good Pope John)

Pope John XXIII’s humility was always lived in service, and he always took the image of the Good Shepherd as his model as the Bishop of Rome. To the surprise of the people of Rome, he regularly visited hospitals, parishes and the prison.

Activity

As a group discuss the following:

- What is humility?
- What can I do to grow in humility?

Challenge each member to think of one action that they can take to grow in humility and conclude with this prayer written by Pope John XXIII for the start of the Second Vatican Council:



*We stand before you, Holy Spirit,
conscious of our sinfulness,
but aware that we gather in your name.
Come to us, remain with us, and enlighten our hearts.
Give us light and strength to know your will,
to make it our own,
and to live it in our lives.
Guide us by your wisdom, support us by your power,
for you are God, sharing the glory of Father and Son.
You desire justice for all:
enable us to uphold the rights of others;
do not allow us to be misled by ignorance
or corrupted by fear or favour.
Unite us to yourself in the bond of love
and keep us faithful to all that is true.
As we gather in your name
may we temper justice with love,
so that all our decisions may be pleasing to you,
and earn the reward promised to
good and faithful servants.
You live and reign with the Father and the Son,
one God, forever and ever.
Amen.*

*“As a young priest my only
aspiration was to become a
country-priest”*

*Pope John XXIII address
upon his arrival in Venice.*

“I am the servant of servants”.

*Pope John XXIII
at St Peter’s Basilica*

*You cannot come to me, so I come to you... So here I am, I have come, you have seen me. I have looked into your eyes, I have placed my heart alongside your hearts.
Be assured that this meeting will remain deeply engraved in my heart.”*

Visit to Regina Coeli Prison, Rome, 1958.

A man of joy

Pope John XXIII was a man who loved life. He had an appetite for the good things in life (he often made fun of his own considerable size – none of the white cassocks prepared for the new pope at his election fit him!), and loved to be in the company of others. While it was previously tradition for the Pope to dine alone, when he became Pope he set aside this convention and enjoyed hosting dinner guests.

He was a man with a quick sense of humour. Once a visiting journalist asked him how many people worked in the Vatican, to which Pope John XXIII replied “About half!”

His attitude towards the world was one of embracing opportunity and not being afraid, an attitude which expressed his confidence in the guidance of God for his church. On opening Vatican II he implored people not to be “prophets of doom” who can “see nothing but calamity and disaster in the present state of the world.” Instead he invited those at the council to keep in mind “what is needed at the present time is a new enthusiasm, a new joy and serenity of mind.”



Activity

As a group discuss the following:

- What is joy?
- What can I do to be joyful and spread joy to others?

Challenge each member to think of one action that they can take to grow in joy and conclude with this Decalogue of resolutions written by Pope John XXIII:

- 1) *Only for today, I will seek to live the day positively without wishing to solve the problems of my life all at once.*
- 2) *Only for today, I will take the greatest care of my appearance: I will dress modestly; I will not raise my voice; I will be courteous in my behaviour; I will not criticize anyone; I will not claim to improve or to discipline anyone except myself.*
- 3) *Only for today, I will be happy in the certainty that I was created to be happy, not only in the other world but also in this one.*
- 4) *Only for today, I will adapt to circumstances, without requiring all circumstances to be adapted to my own wishes.*
- 5) *Only for today, I will devote 10 minutes of my time to some good reading, remembering that just as food is necessary to the life of the body, so good reading is necessary to the life of the soul.*
- 6) *Only for today, I will do one good deed and not tell anyone about it.*
- 7) *Only for today, I will do at least one thing I do not like doing; and if my feelings are hurt, I will make sure that no one notices.*
- 8) *Only for today, I will make a plan for myself: I may not follow it to the letter, but I will make it. And I will be on guard against two evils: hastiness and indecision.*
- 9) *Only for today, I will firmly believe, despite appearances, that the good Providence of God cares for me as no one else who exists in this world.*
- 10) *Only for today, I will have no fears. In particular, I will not be afraid to enjoy what is beautiful and to believe in goodness. Indeed, for 12 hours I can certainly do what might cause me consternation were I to believe I had to do it all my life.*

“You must be constantly on your guard against pessimism. A humble and cheerful nature, without moods and fancies, is a great boon, a source of success in our own lives, and a help to others!”

Letter to his nephew, February, 1950.

Section two: The Second Vatican Council

Part 2: Introduction to Vatican II



Activity

Present the group with the following and ask them if they know what it is: (You may like to hand it out to the young people or put it up on a screen)

Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum. Adveniat regnum tuum. Fiat voluntas tua, sicut in caelo et in terra. Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie, et dimitte nobis debita nostra sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris. Et ne nos inducas in tentationem, sed libera nos a malo. Amen.

After confirming that the above is actually the Our Father in Latin, introduce the following Latin Quiz. This is just for fun to see if any other young people can recognise some of the words and phrases. You may like to hand out answer sheets or simply call out each phrase and have people guess what it means:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Beata Virgo Maria | Blessed Virgin Mary |
| 2. Beati pauperes spiritu | Blessed are the poor in spirit |
| 3. Adeste Fideles | O come, all ye faithful |
| 4. Corpus Christi | The Body of Christ |
| 5. Deo gratias | Thanks be to God |
| 6. Ora pro nobis | Pray for us |
| 7. Dominus | The Lord |
| 8. Agnus Dei | The Lamb of God |
| 9. Gloria in excelsis | Glory to God in the highest |
| 10. Salve Regina | Hail Holy Queen |

Vatican II talk notes:

Before the Second Vatican Council all Catholics were used to hearing Latin. The Mass was prayed in Latin and so were many other prayers in the Church. Your grandparents and many of the Saints of the Church were used to Mass in Latin. Now, 60 years later, very few Catholics can understand Latin – as we just saw in our activity. This is just one of the changes that occurred through the Second Vatican Council.

What is a council?

- A council is a special gathering of church leaders or bishops to discuss important matters in the Church.
- Over the 2000 years of the Church's history there have been 21 councils held.
- In the early years of the Church, many of the councils were called to settle debates about who Christ was and what the Church believed. The Nicene Creed (which we say at Mass each Sunday) was developed after the first Council which was held in Nicaea in the year 325.
- We believe that councils are guided by the Holy Spirit

Why did John XXIII decide to hold another Council?

- He wanted the council to renew and update the Church
- He wanted to reach out to our brothers and sisters from other Christian churches to work towards Christian unity

How did it happen?

- Pope John the XXIII announced the Council in 1959
- There was a period of three years preparation. During this time, bishops from around the world were able to make a submission about the themes that should be discussed at the council.
- The Council officially opened in October 1962 and closed on 8th December 1965.

What was the result of the council?

- Many of the Church's teachings were updated.
- There were 16 official documents produced from the discussions at the Council
 - o 4 Constitutions
 - o 9 Decrees
 - o 3 Declarations

A constitution is a summary of the Church's teaching in a particular area. It sets the tone and gives overarching and general doctrinal definitions of Catholic belief. The Decrees and Declarations are more specific in addressing certain areas of concern within Catholic life and practice.

Part 2: Summary of the four main reforms of the council

There were many changes in the Church after the Council. The four main areas of reform were:

- Changes to the liturgy
 - o The Mass which had been celebrated in Latin was now to be celebrated in the local language of the people.
 - o The priest was to face the people during Mass
 - o Lay people (including women) were able to read the Readings
 - o Lay people could assist with distributing Communion
 - o People could receive Communion in their hands
 - o Communion of both kinds could be received (i.e. consecrated bread and wine)
- A bigger role for lay people (A "lay" person is any church member who is neither ordained nor a member of a religious order)
 - o The council spoke about the unique place of the laity in the church by virtue of baptism and confirmation
 - o All the baptised share in the Church's universal call to holiness (not just priests and nuns, as was previously believed)
 - o Lay people were encouraged to work for peace and unity as well as to evangelise and do other works of charity.
 - o A bigger role in the Mass (as above)
- The Scriptures
 - o Encouragement for all people to read the Scripture in their personal prayer
 - o More readings were chosen to be included at Mass
- Engagement with people of other faiths
 - o Catholics were encouraged to respect all religions
 - o Catholics could attend non-Catholic religious services e.g. weddings and funerals held in other churches
 - o The Church acknowledged that salvation was possible outside the Catholic church

Activity:

Conclude the session by inviting the young people to pray the Our Father in Latin. You can explain that even though Mass and most prayers are now said in the local language, the universal language of Latin still has a place in our Church. It helps to remind us of the universality of the Church, that is, that we come from all different nations but share the one faith.

Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum. Adveniat regnum tuum. Fiat voluntas tua, sicut in caelo et in terra. Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie, et dimitte nobis debita nostra sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris. Et ne nos inducas in tentationem, sed libera nos a malo. Amen.

Resources

Videos

- James Martin SJ discusses the joy of Pope John XXIII: www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDeQ2q9gwI8
- Sermon of the Moon: www.youtube.com/watch?v=snMCpvJw2bc#t=169
- Challenge, Change, Faith – a documentary on Pope John XXIII and Vatican II (You can order a copy from <http://challengechangefaith.com/>)

Books

- *The Wit and Wisdom of Good Pope John*, Henri Fesquet, 1964
A collection of anecdotes and quotes which reveal Pope John XXIII warmth, humour and wit.
- *Pope John XXIII: In my own words*, Anthony Chiffolo, 1999
A compilation of quotes from Pope John XXIII's journal, personal letters, addresses and encyclicals.
- *A Friendly Guide to Vatican II*, Fr Max Vodola, 2012
An easy to read book about Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council.
- A collection of articles were written in the Archdiocesan magazine Kairos during 2010. They can be found: www.cam.org.au/News-and-Events/Features/Catholic-Heritage/Page/4



Images

When the Catholic Church met the Modern World. A gallery of images from the opening of the Second Vatican Council, by Life Magazine: <http://life.time.com/history/vatican-ii-when-the-catholic-church-met-the-modern-world-1962-1965/#1>

Images from the Council were taken and are available in the Vatican Photo Archive, found at: <http://www.photovat.com/>

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