

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John XXIII

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: October 11

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IN BRIEF

Saint John XXIII

Pope from 1958 to 1963, known as Good Pope John, who opened the Second Vatican Council.

Feast day	October 11
Born	November 25, 1881, Sotto il Monte, Lombardy, Italy
Died	June 3, 1963, Vatican City
Canonized	April 27, 2014, by Pope Francis
Era	20th century
Patron saint of	Italian Army

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint John XXIII

Saint John XXIII, born Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, was pope from 1958 to 1963. The son of farmers from Lombardy and a diplomat of the Holy See for nearly thirty years, he was elected at almost seventy-seven, and many saw him as a caretaker pope. Three months later he announced an ecumenical council, Vatican II, which would transform the Church. His kindness and humor earned him the nickname "Good Pope John." He died on June 3, 1963, was canonized in 2014 and is celebrated on October 11, the day the Council opened.

Who was Saint John XXIII?

Angelo Roncalli was born on November 25, 1881, in Sotto il Monte, near Bergamo in northern Italy, into a large family of sharecroppers. He grew up poor, but in a home where the family prayed together and shared the little they had. He entered the seminary of Bergamo at a young age, continued his studies in Rome and was ordained a priest there on August 10, 1904. From his youth he kept a spiritual diary, published after his death as *Journal of a Soul*.

Back in Bergamo, he became secretary to the bishop, Giacomo Radini Tedeschi, who was deeply committed to social action, and taught Church history at the seminary. During the First World War, he served as a medical orderly and then as a military chaplain. This is why the Church proclaimed him patron of the Italian Army in 2017.

Key dates in the life of John XXIII

- **November 25, 1881**: Born in Sotto il Monte.
- **August 10, 1904**: Ordained a priest in Rome.
- **1915-1918**: Medical orderly, then military chaplain during the Great War.

- **1925**: Bishop and representative of the pope in Bulgaria.
- **1934**: Apostolic delegate to Turkey and Greece.
- **December 1944**: Apostolic nuncio to France.
- **1953**: Cardinal and Patriarch of Venice.
- **October 28, 1958**: Elected pope, he takes the name John.
- **January 25, 1959**: Announces the Second Vatican Council.
- **1961**: Encyclical *Mater et Magistra* on the social question.
- **October 11, 1962**: Opening of the Council; in the evening, the "Moon Speech."
- **April 11, 1963**: Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* on peace.
- **June 3, 1963**: Dies in the Vatican.
- **September 3, 2000**: Beatified by John Paul II.
- **April 27, 2014**: Canonized by Pope Francis, on the same day as John Paul II.

A diplomat in the service of peace

From 1925 to 1953, Roncalli represented the Holy See in Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece and then France. There he lived alongside Orthodox Christians, Muslims and Jews, and learned an art of patient dialogue that would mark his pontificate. In Istanbul, during the Second World War, he helped many Jewish refugees escape Nazi persecution. In Paris, where he was nuncio from 1944 to 1953, his good nature and culture won him the sympathy of the most varied political circles.

The pope of the Council

Elected on October 28, 1958, John XXIII surprised everyone in his first weeks: he visited sick children at the Bambino Gesù hospital and the inmates of Rome's Regina Coeli prison. On January 25, 1959, at the Basilica of Saint Paul

Outside the Walls, he announced his intention to convene an ecumenical council. He wanted an "aggiornamento," an updating of the Church, so that she might proclaim the Gospel in a way the modern world could understand, without changing anything of the faith.

The Second Vatican Council opened on October 11, 1962. That evening, before a crowd gathered by torchlight in Saint Peter's Square, he improvised from his window the famous "Moon Speech," asking parents to go home and give their children a caress from the pope. A few days later, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, he made an appeal for peace that was heard in Washington as well as in Moscow.



The opening of the Second Vatican Council, October 11, 1962.

Pacem in Terris and the death of Good Pope John

Already ill with cancer, John XXIII published the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* in April 1963. For the first time, a papal encyclical was addressed not only to Catholics but "to all men of good will." In it he founded peace on truth, justice, love and freedom, and on respect for the rights of every person. He died on June 3, 1963, while crowds prayed in Saint Peter's Square. The Council was continued and completed by his successor, Saint Paul VI.

What can we learn from his holiness?

John XXIII shows that a person of deep faith can keep a sense of humor, simplicity and trust. His *Journal of a Soul* reveals a demanding inner life, made of small resolutions renewed again and again. He did not become a saint through spectacular deeds, but through daily faithfulness and goodness toward everyone he met.

Why is Saint John XXIII the patron of the Italian Army?

During the First World War, the young priest Roncalli served first as a medical orderly and then as a chaplain to soldiers. He saw young men suffer and die, and kept a deep horror of war all his life. In 2017 the Church named him patron of the Italian Army, honoring the soldier-priest who became the pope of *Pacem in Terris*.

Beyond this official patronage, Catholics around the world pray to him for peace, for Christian unity, for families and for serenity in times of trial. You can pray with him using the prayer to Saint John XXIII and the novena to Saint John XXIII, from October 2 to 10.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint John XXIII in art

- **His round, smiling face** and sturdy build, familiar from countless photographs.

- **The white papal zucchetto and red mozzetta**, as in his official portraits.
- **The opening of Vatican II**, often shown in images of the pope among the bishops.
- **The camauro**, the red velvet winter cap he wore in some well-known photographs.



The reliquary of Saint John XXIII in Saint Peter's Basilica.

Where to pray to Saint John XXIII

- **Rome**: his body rests in Saint Peter's Basilica, beneath the altar of Saint Jerome, where it was moved in 2001.
- **Sotto il Monte** (Lombardy): his home village, with the house where he was born and the residence of Ca' Maitino.
- **Bergamo**: the seminary and cathedral of his home diocese.
- **Venice**: Saint Mark's Basilica, his seat as patriarch from 1953 to 1958.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint John XXIII for Peace and Serenity

Saint John XXIII left many prayers in his *Journal of a Soul*, but none has become a traditional prayer in the strict sense. Below you will find two of his best-known words, with their sources, followed by an original prayer to Saint John XXIII by Saintspedia.

The "Moon Speech"

On the evening of October 11, 1962, the day the Council opened, an immense crowd gathered by torchlight in Saint Peter's Square. John XXIII, who was not supposed to speak, appeared at his window and improvised a few words. Here is the most famous passage:

> *"When you go back home, you will find your children. Give them a caress and tell them: this is the caress of the pope."*

Source: improvised address of John XXIII to the faithful, Saint Peter's Square, October 11, 1962 (translated from the Italian by Saintspedia).

Pacem in Terris

> *"Peace on Earth, which all men of every era have most eagerly yearned for, can be firmly established only if the order laid down by God be dutifully observed."*

Source: John XXIII, encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, no. 1, April 11, 1963. The full text is available on the Vatican website.

Prayer to Saint John XXIII

Saint John XXIII, Good Pope John, you who kept all your life the simple heart of the child of Sotto il Monte, pray for us.

You who knew how to meet everyone with kindness, Christians and non-Christians, the powerful and prisoners, teach me to look at others with goodwill and to seek first what unites us.

You who opened the windows of the Church to the breath of the Spirit, obtain for us the courage to renew ourselves without losing anything of the faith we have received.

I entrust to you peace in the world, the unity of Christians, my family and my intention: (name it in silence). Give me the serenity to do today what I can, and to leave the rest to God.

May your goodness and your trust become mine, and at the end of this day may I, like you, fall asleep in peace in the hands of the Father. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint John XXIII is celebrated on October 11, the anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Pray to him in times of worry, for peace in the world, for the unity of Christians, for your children and grandchildren, or for someone who is sick or in prison. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint John XXIII, from October 2 to 10, and read the life of Saint John XXIII.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John XXIII

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint John XXIII and by his *Journal of a Soul*. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on October 2: it ends on October 10, the day before his feast on October 11. You can also pray it at any time of year, for peace, for your family or to find serenity in a time of trial.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father. The suggested act, often a simple gesture of kindness, carries the prayer into your day. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

The nine days follow the path of his life, from the farmhouse of Sotto il Monte to the opening of the Council and the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*.



Saint John XXIII, in a church statue or window.

Day 1: Faith received in the family

Angelo Roncalli learned to pray in a poor farmhouse, surrounded by a large family. All his life he said that the best of what he knew, he had received at home. Prayer said together around the table, work shared and bread shared were his first school of faith.

Prayer: Lord, bless my family and those who taught me to know you.

Today: Spend a moment praying with someone close to you, or for them.

Day 2: Simplicity

Once he became pope, John XXIII remained the simple man of Sotto il Monte. He did not try to impress anyone, and that made him close to everyone.

Prayer: Lord, free me from the need to make an impression. Give me a simple heart.

Today: In a conversation, let go of the urge to put yourself forward.

Day 3: Small resolutions

In his diary, the young seminarian wrote down modest resolutions, which he took up again and again. Holiness is built step by step, and failure is never the last word for someone who begins again.

Prayer: Lord, help me keep one small resolution today, and begin again tomorrow.

Today: Choose one simple resolution to keep until the end of the novena.

Day 4: Serving in times of trial

As a medical orderly and chaplain during the Great War, Roncalli watched young soldiers die. He kept a deep horror of war from it, and a great tenderness for those who suffer.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you soldiers, the wounded and those who care for them.

Today: Pray for the victims of a conflict happening today.

Day 5: Meeting the other

In Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece, he lived among believers of other traditions. He looked first for what brings people together, without giving up his own faith.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to see a brother or a sister in every person.

Today: Welcome with kindness someone who is different from you.

Day 6: Saving lives

In Istanbul, during the Second World War, he helped Jewish refugees escape persecution. Charity sometimes requires courage and creativity, and the willingness to take risks for others.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to act for those who are in danger.

Today: Support an organization that helps refugees or persecuted people.



Praying with Saint John XXIII.

Day 7: Visiting the forgotten

At Christmas 1958, the new pope visited sick children and prisoners in Rome. He told them he had come to see them because they could not come to him. A pope among inmates and sick children: the image went around the world and revealed a shepherd close to his flock.

Prayer: Christ, present in the sick and the prisoner, send me to those who are waiting for a visit.

Today: Visit someone who is sick, elderly or alone.

Day 8: Opening the windows

By announcing the Council, John XXIII wanted the Church to speak to the world of its time. He trusted the Holy Spirit more than his own plans. Renewal did not frighten him, because he was rooted in a faith that does not change.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, renew your Church and renew my heart.

Today: Read the Gospel of the day and share a phrase from it with someone.

Day 9: Peace on earth

Already ill, the pope wrote *Pacem in Terris* for "all men of good will." He died a few weeks later, serene, surrounded by prayer.

Prayer: Lord, I place the intention of this novena in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint John XXIII, give peace to the world and serenity to my heart. Amen.

Today: As the pope asked on the evening of the Council's opening, give a sign of tenderness to a child or a loved one.

Closing prayer

Saint John XXIII, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have placed before you. Pray for peace, for the unity of Christians and for families. Obtain for me your kindness, your trust and your serenity. Amen.

After the novena

On October 11, if you can, attend Mass and pray for the Church and for peace in the world. Keep the small resolution you chose on the third day, and renew it each morning, as John XXIII did all his life. And when worry keeps you awake, remember his trust: do what you can today, and leave the rest to God.

To go further, read the life of Saint John XXIII and pray the prayer to Saint John XXIII.

PILGRIMAGE

Sotto il Monte, Birthplace Village of Saint John XXIII

Sotto il Monte, a small village in the hills of Bergamo, in Lombardy, is the birthplace of Saint John XXIII. The village now officially bears his name, Sotto il Monte Giovanni XXIII, and welcomes many pilgrims each year who come to discover the places of the childhood of "Good Pope John."

The birthplace

Angelo Roncalli was born on November 25, 1881, in a modest farmhouse in the hamlet of Brusicco, where his family of sharecroppers lived with other relatives. Visitors discover rooms of peasant life of the late 19th century. Very close by, the church where he was baptized on the very day of his birth recalls the faith handed down in his family.



Sotto il Monte, birthplace village of Saint John XXIII.

Ca′ Maitino

During his years as a diplomat and then as Patriarch of Venice, Roncalli spent his summer vacations at Ca′ Maitino, a house in the village. It now houses a museum where personal objects, liturgical vestments, and mementos of his pontificate are kept, as well as a chapel.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you may read the life of Saint John XXIII. On site, take a moment of silence in the church or in the chapel of Ca′ Maitino to entrust an intention for peace or serenity. The prayer to Saint John XXIII can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Praying at the tomb of John XXIII in Rome

The body of Saint John XXIII rests in Rome, in Saint Peter's Basilica, beneath the Altar of Saint Jerome, in the right aisle. It has been visible there in a glass case since its transfer from the Vatican Grottoes in 2001, after his beatification. It is one of the most visited places in the basilica. A few steps away is the chapel where Saint John Paul II, canonized the same day as he was, rests.



Sotto il Monte, birthplace village of Saint John XXIII, the interior.

Other places of Saint John XXIII

- **Bergamo**: the seminary and the cathedral of his home diocese.
- **Venice**: Saint Mark's Basilica, seat of his patriarchate from 1953 to 1958.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, where he announced the Council on January 25, 1959.

Practical information

Sotto il Monte is about nine miles west of Bergamo, whose airport is served by direct flights from several French cities. A car is useful for getting around the village's various sites. The hours of the birthplace and of Ca' Maitino vary by season: check them with the shrines before you come, especially around October 11 and June 3.

Credits and sources

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