

**A
FRIENDLY
GUIDE TO**

VATICAN II

MAX VODOLA

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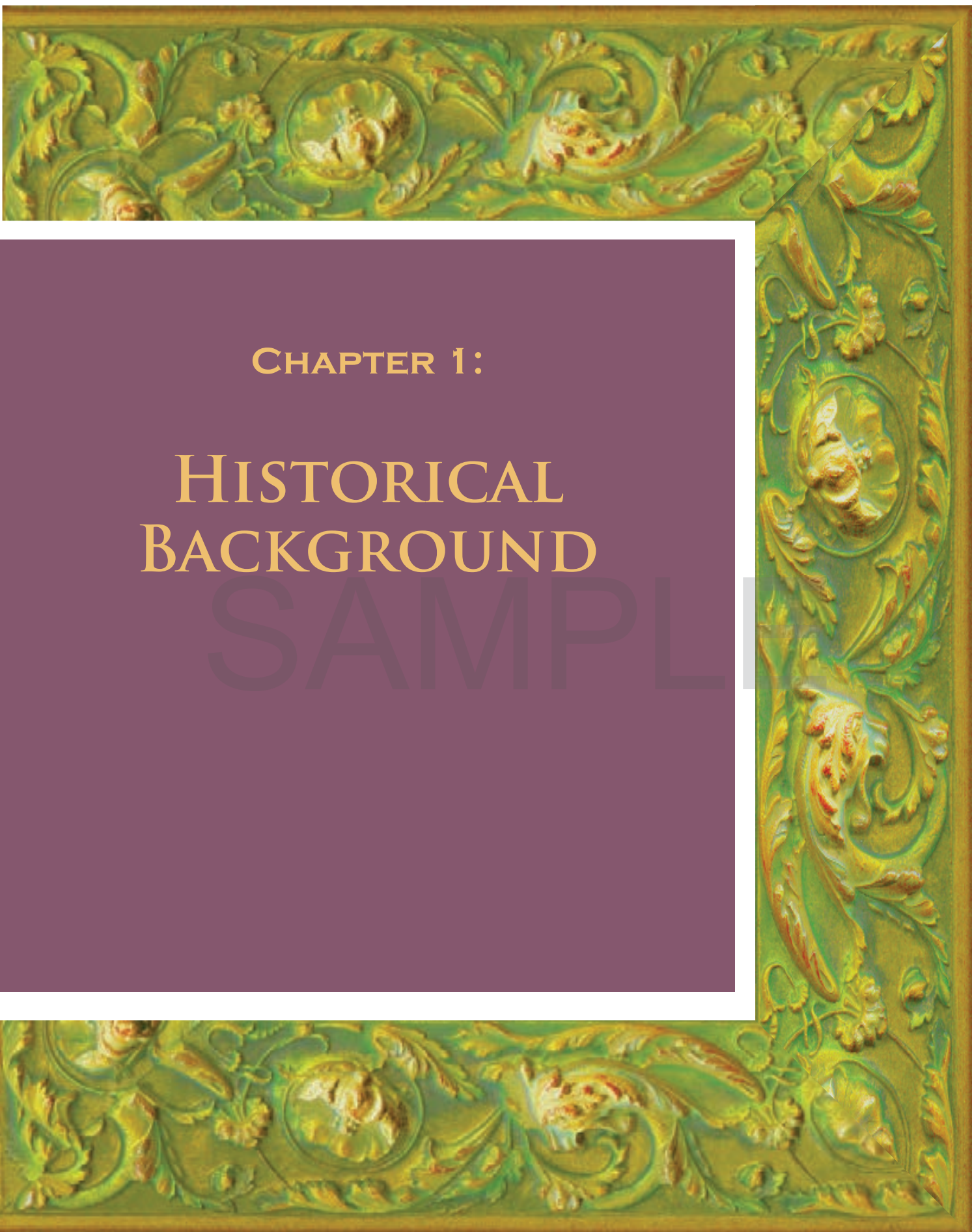
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CONTENTS

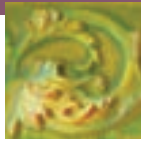
CHAPTER 1	HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	3
	Councils in the Church	4
	Pope John XXIII	5
	Early Years	5
	As Priest	7
	As Bishop	8
	As Nuncio	10
	As Cardinal	12
	As Pope	12
CHAPTER 2	CALLING THE COUNCIL (VATICAN II)	14
	The first 100 Days	16
	The First Session of Vatican II	19
	Death of the Pope	21
	Further Sessions	22
	Vatican II – The Australian Contribution	23
	The Second Vatican Council: A Time line	26
CHAPTER 3	IMPLEMENTING VATICAN II	29
	Some major reforms of Vatican II	32
	Documents of Vatican II	33
CHAPTER 4	THE CONTINUING DEBATES	43
	Understanding the Council that changed our Lives	44
	The Nature of the Change	46



CHAPTER 1:

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

COUNCILS IN THE CHURCH



A council is an occasional gathering of church representatives, mainly bishops, for the purpose of consultation and decision-making on important matters in the life of the Church. The Church teaches that such councils are convoked under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in order to determine issues relating to doctrine, dogma and theological practice binding on the whole church. The form, style, length and structure of councils have varied greatly over the centuries, often in relation to the disputed theological issue which gave rise to the council and the historical

context of the time. Vatican II or the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) was designated the twenty-first Ecumenical Council, the first being Nicaea in 325. The early councils of the Church concentrated largely on the ‘Christological’ controversies; that is, clarifying in a theological way the unity of Christ’s humanity and divinity. The Creed that is recited at Mass on Sundays was formulated and refined in the course of these early councils. A close study of councils also reveals often fiery and lengthy debate over controversial and contentious issues in the life of the Church.



Rendering of Pope Pius IX addressing the First Vatican Council (1869)

DID YOU KNOW?

There have been twenty-one Ecumenical Councils in the history of the Church

1.	Nicaea I	325	13.	Lyons I	1245
2.	Constantinople I	381	14.	Lyons II	1274
3.	Ephesus	431	15.	Vienne	1311
4.	Chalcedon	451	16.	Constance	1414–18
5.	Constantinople II	553	17.	Florence	1431–45
6.	Constantinople III	680	(also known as Basel-Ferrara-Florence-Rome)		
7.	Nicaea II	787	18.	Lateran V	1512–17
8.	Constantinople IV	869	19.	Trent	1545–63
9.	Lateran I	1123	20.	Vatican I	1869–70
10.	Lateran II	1139	21.	Vatican II	1962–65
11.	Lateran III	1179			
12.	Lateran IV	1215			

POPE JOHN XXIII



EARLY YEARS

Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was born on 25 November 1881 in the small village of Sotto il Monte in Bergamo, in northern Italy. He was the fourth of eleven children and the first son to his parents who were local tenant farmers. By all accounts, the young Angelo had an unremarkable upbringing. Later, as pope, Roncalli would recall with affection the relative poverty, humility and simplicity of his early years. His primary education was in the local village school. Expressing a desire for the priesthood, Angelo was then sent to the minor seminary in Bergamo; he followed this with studies in Rome.

As a teenage seminarian, Roncalli commenced

what would become his great spiritual testament, *Journal of a Soul*, and he remained faithful in maintaining this journal throughout his life, including his relatively short papacy. Much in the journal is consistent with many of the images of him when he was pope – kind, benign, humble, open-hearted, faithful to his Christian calling and priestly commitment, and eager to do the will of God by following the example of the saints. On the surface, *Journal of a Soul* reflects the spirituality of the time in a young aspirant to the priesthood – resolutions regarding prayer and fasting, going to confession, praying the rosary, visits to the Blessed Sacrament and examination of conscience. However, the journal also reflects the intersection in Roncalli between spiritual development and

intellectual formation, his capacity to reflect on his experience in the light of Christian history and his ability to situate himself within the context of some of the burning questions and issues of the day.

Roncalli arrived in Rome early in 1901 (aged nineteen) to complete his studies for the priesthood. There was great intellectual and theological ferment in Rome at this time due to the use of what is known as the ‘historical-critical’ method of biblical studies which was widely used in Protestant circles but frowned upon by the Catholic Church. The young Roncalli was surrounded by professors and fellow students who wanted the Catholic Church to embrace with vigour this critical study of the bible and theology. The ‘would-be’ historian expressed some cautious openness to these ideas and entries in *Journal of a Soul* reveal moments of deep spiritual and intellectual struggle:

My study shall always be in all sacred sciences and in all questions of a theological or biblical nature to investigate first the traditional doctrine

of the Church and on this basis to judge the findings of contemporary scholarship. I do not despise critical thought and I shall be most careful not to think ill of critics or treat them with disrespect. On the contrary, I love critical thought, I shall be glad to keep up with the most recent findings, I shall study the new systems of thought and their continual evolution and their trends; criticism for me is light, is truth, and there is only one truth which is sacred.

Here we see evidence of how Roncalli in his journey to the priesthood was being shaped by some of the wider historical, theological and cultural shifts in Catholicism which was a source of some tension in the Church. While Pope Pius X rejected any sense of openness towards the historical-critical approach to theology and the scriptures, this time of struggle for Roncalli planted a seed in the heart of the would-be historian. His reflections and writings show how Roncalli was interpreting the reality of *change* in his own life and in the life of the Church.



Bergamo Italy, birthplace of Roncalli

AS PRIEST

Roncalli was ordained to the priesthood in Rome on 10 August 1904. There was speculation that he would remain in Rome to continue higher studies in canon law, but the appointment of a new bishop to Bergamo changed all that. Giacomo Radini Tedeschi (1857–1914) was consecrated Bishop of Bergamo personally by Pope Pius X in the Sistine Chapel on 29 January 1905. Roncalli assisted at the ceremony and was later chosen to be the personal secretary of the new bishop. On his return to Bergamo, Roncalli was occupied in two main tasks: lecturer at the diocesan seminary in history, patristics and apologetics and secretary to Tedeschi. The new bishop modelled for his secretary something that would be essential to Roncalli's later career: an emphasis on the bishop as pastor and shepherd, attentive to the needs of his flock and seeking to bring about necessary adaptation

that would later reveal something of the reason for calling Vatican II:

There had been no synod in Bergamo since 1724 – a gap of nearly two hundred years – so the occasion had special significance. The mass of old and new diocesan legislation which had been found here and there in innumerable documents, instructions, traditions and local customs was revised, brought into line with the needs of modern times and altered circumstances and given new and authoritative confirmation.

A.G. Roncalli, *My Bishop: A Portrait of Mgr. Giacomo Maria Radini Tedeschi*. (Translated by D White). London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1969, p. 92.

The phrase 'revised and brought into line with the needs of modern times' is a key phrase from the early writings of Roncalli that help us to understand how history was shaping his perspective on the life and mission of the Church. The word '*aggiornamento*'

CRITICISM FOR ME IS LIGHT, IS TRUTH,
AND THERE IS ONLY ONE TRUTH
WHICH IS SACRED.



and renewal of the diocese in the face of new and changing historical realities.

In order to familiarise himself with his new diocese, Tedeschi commenced a prodigious and extensive program of pastoral visitation of the diocese of Bergamo, which at that time numbered approximately 350 parishes. Working alongside the bishop, Roncalli began to develop an understanding of the essential link between pastoral activity and the process of renewal in the Church. The pastoral visitation culminated in a diocesan synod which was held in 1910. As secretary of the bishop, Roncalli was also appointed official secretary of the synod and charged with publication of the relevant documents. In a biography published soon after Tedeschi's death in 1914, Roncalli spoke of the synod as 'the most solemn and important event of his episcopate ... a source of intense joy'. It is important to note the way Roncalli framed his ideas historically and shaped a form of language

(bringing up to date) would later be used at Vatican II as a word associated with John XXIII.

As Roncalli threw himself into his work as seminary lecturer and bishop's secretary, he also found time to research and publish articles in the local Catholic journal *La Vita Diocesana* on the previous bishops of Bergamo, the various diocesan synods and other items of local history. But it was a chance discovery at this time that would engage Roncalli's historical interest over a lifetime and which would shape his vision and language as pope in calling the Second Vatican Council. On a trip to Milan in 1906 with Tedeschi, Roncalli took himself off to the diocesan archives and made an accidental discovery. He found 39 volumes of original material related to Borromeo's apostolic visitation to Bergamo in 1575 in the wake of the Council of Trent. The material was marked '*Archivio Spirituale – Bergamo*'. Roncalli wrote:

I was immediately struck by the collection of 39 parchment volumes which I discovered and explored in great detail on subsequent visits. What a pleasant surprise to find bound together such a copious and interesting collection of documents on the Church in Bergamo in a period of characteristic renewal following the Council of Trent ...

A.G. Roncalli, *Gli Atti della Visita Apostolica di San Carlo Borromeo a Bergamo (1575)*. Vol I. Firenze: Olschki, 1936

Roncalli brought this material to the bishop's attention; the bishop then established a special commission to photograph, transcribe and edit this material. There were big plans underway for numerous publications. However by 1914 Tedeschi was dead and the First World War was about to break out. The new bishop of Bergamo showed little interest in this work and the commission was disbanded. But Roncalli held onto the material and also to the dream of one day seeing it published.

AS BISHOP

In the early 1920s, Roncalli left Bergamo and was called to Rome where he was appointed National Director of the Missions. He seemed to enjoy this work of travelling around Italy and raising funds. However, he was greatly shocked in 1925 when he was informed that Pope Pius XI (1922–39) had selected him as Apostolic Visitor to Bulgaria. Roncalli had not undertaken any formal training as a papal diplomat and was to be consecrated a bishop for the purposes of this new ministry. His association with Pius XI (Achille Ratti) was quite fortuitous. Ratti had been prefect of the Ambrosian Library in Milan and was an expert librarian, linguist and archivist. It was Ratti who both supervised and gave expert advice to the young Roncalli in copying, transcribing and editing Borromeo's 1575 apostolic visitation to Bergamo.

Roncalli was consecrated a bishop on 19 March



Council of Trent (1545-63)

1925 at the church of San Carlo in Rome. He set off to a largely unknown country with a very small and scattered Catholic population, vastly different from the world of Bergamo and Rome that had been familiar to him. But this important period in his life demonstrated an essential and endearing feature of Roncalli's personality – openness to new ideas, new experiences, new times and new historical circumstances. Roncalli's task in Bulgaria was to assess local conditions for the Church and report back to Rome. He thought his mission would last about six months and that he would then be moved elsewhere either to a diocese of his own in Italy or to a more prestigious diplomatic appointment elsewhere. As the time passed, Roncalli's diary and letters home hint at a certain sense of 'languishing' in Bulgaria. He had always trusted God's will for his life and was under obedience from the pope.



St Charles Borromeo (1538-1584)

During his time in Bulgaria, Roncalli began to finesse his own pastoral style of ministry, modelled very much on the historical figure of Borromeo and the example of Tedeschi. He made numerous visits to victims of a tragic earthquake in 1928 and made available relief aid to Catholics and non-Catholics alike which made a favourable impression on civic authorities. As a young bishop, Roncalli constantly made reference to the essentially 'pastoral' nature of his ministry as a papal diplomat. In a letter to his superiors in Rome, Roncalli spoke of 'the new era for the Catholic Church in the Orient ... a sign of the times'. Roncalli often worked towards positive, warm and friendly relations with the various branches of the Orthodox tradition and other non-Catholic communities, seeking to avoid the use of harsh language such as 'heretics' and 'schismatics'.

DID YOU KNOW?

During his time in Bulgaria, Roncalli spoke with great warmth and affection on the issue of ecumenism which became a hallmark of Vatican II.

I offer greetings and best wishes also to our separated Orthodox brothers (and sisters), separated from us because of diverse disciplinary reasons, but joined to us in the same adoration of Father, Son and Holy Spirit...that one day, not too far from now, we will see ourselves united in the participation of peace and joy that the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, pours out incessantly on the Catholic Church...

Bulgaria, Feast of Pentecost, May 1925.

AS NUNCIO

In 1934, Roncalli was advised by the Holy See that his new diplomatic posting would be to Turkey and Greece. He remained there throughout the Second World War and became known for his friendly and open attitude to non-Catholic Christians and adherents to the Muslim and Jewish faith. It was during this time that Roncalli re-commenced the work of editing the historical material on Borromeo that had been left in abeyance two decades previously. In the slow and time-consuming task of editing this material, often late into the night, Roncalli started to see some parallels between Borromeo's pastoral reform of the Church in the wake of Trent in the sixteenth century and Roncalli's diplomatic and pastoral ministry in the changing circumstances of the early twentieth century. Just as the Church in the wake of Trent had to adapt to new circumstances and bring about pastoral reform and renewal, Roncalli discerned for himself a similar need and pattern as he went about the business of papal diplomacy and extensive pastoral visitation which he described as 'the principal act of my ministry'.

In a remarkable burst of energy, Roncalli was able to publish three dense volumes of Borromeo's visitation titled *The Acts of the Apostolic Visitation of St Charles Borromeo to Bergamo (1575)*. The

Introduction to Volume 1 published in 1936 deserves particular attention. In describing the pastoral renewal instigated by Trent and practiced by Borromeo, Roncalli describes this period as 'a fruitful rejuvenation of the Church ... a vigorous regaining of Catholic life ... an awakening of such potent energy not known in any other period of the Church'. Roncalli reserves a special place for Borromeo whom he praises for being a model bishop 'extending the benefits of his prodigious reforming activity throughout the parishes of the region'. Borromeo is recognised for his pastoral zeal and his ability to meet 'the new needs of the time'.

In 1944, Roncalli was transferred to the prestigious diplomatic post of Paris. He had now entered the upper echelons of Vatican diplomacy. But this promotion did not radically change the priest born of humble origins. Roncalli's diary for this period shows consistent references to the essentially 'pastoral' nature of his diplomatic ministry, his dynamic view of history and his sense that the Church and the world were entering 'new times'. At over sixty years of age, Roncalli would work late into the night and while on holidays in Italy to complete the fourth volume of Borromeo's visitation which was published in 1946. This constant intersection between pastoral ministry and historical reflection continued when in 1953 Roncalli was appointed Patriarch of Venice.

DID YOU KNOW?

Prior to the Council of Trent, bishops had charge of numerous dioceses.

Many bishops hardly ever stepped foot in their various dioceses but would leave the administration to delegates and other curial officials.

Trent mandated that a bishop was to have charge of only one diocese, that he was to reside in that diocese, that he was to regularly visit the parishes of that diocese and that he was to establish a seminary for the proper formation of the clergy.

DID YOU KNOW?

It was at the diocesan synod in Venice in 1957 that Roncalli first used the word 'aggiornamento'?

Haven't you heard the word 'aggiornamento' repeated many times? Here is our Church, always young and ready to follow the different changes in the circumstances of life, with the intention of adapting, correcting, improving, and arousing enthusiasm. In summary, this is the nature of the synod: this is its purpose.

St Mark's Venice

AS CARDINAL

In 1953 Roncalli was appointed Patriarch of Venice. He was conscious that he now had what he had always wanted – the direct care of souls as a diocesan bishop. He commenced a prodigious round of pastoral visitation, describing himself constantly as the ‘shepherd’ and ‘pastor’ of the diocese. The extensive pastoral visitation of the diocese culminated in a diocesan synod in 1957. Once again we find Roncalli using a form of words that would reach their peak at Vatican II.

AS POPE

In 1958, Pope Pius XII died after an eighteen year reign. Prior to leaving for Rome, Roncalli wrote in his diary, ‘The grace of the Lord is always with his Church. We are not here on earth to look after a museum but to cultivate a flourishing garden of life and to prepare for a glorious future. The Pope is dead. Long live the Pope’. There was much speculation in Rome about a successor and it was at this time that talk emerged of a ‘transitional’ or ‘caretaker’ pope, one who would simply keep



Pope John XXIII

the wheels of the Vatican bureaucracy in motion without introducing any abrupt policy changes for the Church. Roncalli was seen as that candidate – friendly, warm, harmless, genial, a relatively obscure and uncontroversial figure in the world of papal diplomacy and a respected bishop during his brief time in Venice.

Following his election on 28 October 1958, the Church and the world were immediately struck by the contrast of the new pope with his predecessor. There were many surprises. The first was the choice of name. The Church had had four ‘Pius’ popes in one hundred years. It was felt that the tradition would continue. When Roncalli announced the name ‘John’, it took many by surprise. He stated that he chose ‘John’ because it was the name of his father and the name of the humble parish of his baptism. He also stated that it was the name of innumerable basilicas around the world, including his own Lateran Basilica as Bishop of Rome. He went on, ‘It was the name of the long series of Roman Pontiffs, all of whom had a short pontificate’.

The Church really had not been used to a newly

elected pope speaking so warmly and intimately about his father and the humble parish of his baptism. If his choice of name indicated a new way of thinking for the Church, it was the first of many innovations. In receiving the customary sign of respect from the cardinals following his election, John XXIII insisted that the custom of kissing the pontiff’s feet, a gesture that had imperial overtones, be eliminated forthwith.

Whereas Pius XII had appeared regal, stern and somewhat detached, John XXIII impressed many by his warm and down to earth character. The new pope attempted to rid the Vatican of some of the exaggerated imperial overtones that had surrounded the papal office. As he began his new ministry, he gave subtle hints about the style of papacy he would follow. He spoke of being a shepherd and going out in search of the lost sheep. He directed that his papal coronation was to be held on a feast-day dear to his heart – 4 November, the feast of St Charles Borromeo. The fifth and final volume of the *Atti* was published soon after Roncalli was elected pope.



St Peter's in Rome