

'Renew in our days your miracles ...'

Among the saints and blessed whose prayerful intercession I ask every day is Blessed John XXIII. Deeply loved for his gentleness, simplicity, joy and prayerfulness, he is remembered by the millions touched by his teaching and goodness; when one visits St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, there is always a large crowd praying before his tomb.

He is still loved for good reason, for his impact on the Church was profound and remains strong to this day. Born Nov. 25, 1881, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was the fourth child of a large Italian sharecropper family. Sensing a call to the priesthood, he entered the Bergamo seminary in 1892 and was ordained a priest in 1904.

Through the years he worked as secretary to his bishop and taught courses on history, the early Church Fathers, and apologetics in the local seminary. He was an elegant, profound, effective and sought-after preacher.

When Italy went to war in 1915, Roncalli was drafted as a sergeant in the medical corps and became chaplain to wounded soldiers. After the war, he opened a house for the spiritual needs of young people.

In 1925, Pope Pius XI named him Apostolic Delegate in Bulgaria and ordained him bishop. He chose as his episcopal motto "Obedience and Peace." In 1935 he was named apostolic delegate in Turkey and Greece.

I have often marveled, when reading books about the history of that period, how often Roncalli's name is mentioned as one to whom a wide variety of people — from the most simple to the most influential — went for counsel, support and practical help.

During his years in Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, he developed a reputation as a man of compassion and reconciliation. After the terrible 1925 earthquake in Bulgaria, he was deeply appreciated for his ever-present help for victims.

While serving in Greece and Turkey, he undertook an intense ministry which included dialogue with Orthodox Christians and Islam. After the outbreak of World War II, he did his best to get news from prisoners of war to their families, and he is particularly remembered for assisting many Jews to escape by issuing "transit visas" from the apostolic delegation.

In 1944 Pope Pius XII appointed him apostolic nuncio to France, and in the



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last months of the war he aided prisoners of war and worked to reorganize the Church in France. In 1953 he was named cardinal and appointed "Patriarch of Venice," and on Oct. 28, 1958, he was elected pope.

His pontificate lasted less than five years, but in God's plan it was to have lasting impact. His encyclicals

"Pacem in Terris" ("Peace on Earth") and "Mater et Magistra" ("Mother and Teacher") addressed important aspects of the Church's social teaching and set the stage for further elaboration by the popes who came after him.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he announced the convocation of the Second Vatican Council at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls on Jan. 25, 1959. The council began in 1962, and in this "Year of Faith" convoked by Pope Benedict XVI, we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the council across the world.

Here in the archdiocese we will be marking this great anniversary, as well as the 20th anniversary of the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, with a number of archdiocesan and parish events.

'Breath of newness'

At the beatification of Blessed John XXIII, Blessed John Paul II said:

"Everyone remembers the image of Pope John's smiling face and two outstretched arms embracing the whole world. How many people were won over by his simplicity of heart, combined with a broad experience of people and things! The breath of newness he brought certainly did not concern doctrine, but rather the way to explain it; his style of speaking and acting was new, as was his friendly approach to ordinary people and to the powerful of the world. It was in this spirit that he called the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, thereby turning a new page in the Church's history: Christians heard themselves called to proclaim the Gospel with renewed courage and greater attentiveness to the 'signs' of the

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times. The Council was a truly prophetic insight of this elderly Pontiff who, even amid many difficulties, opened a season of hope for Christians and for humanity.

"In the last moments of his earthly life, he entrusted his testament to the Church: 'What counts the most in life is blessed Jesus Christ, his holy Church, his Gospel, truth and goodness.' We too wish to receive this testament, as we glorify God for having given him to us as a Pastor."

As we join with the Church around the world to begin the "Year of Faith" this week, I wanted to recall in a small way the beautiful legacy of Blessed John XXIII. His were the gifts of prayerfulness, humility, simplicity, brilliance, faith, obedience, the spirit of mission and belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and the eternal truth of the Gospel.

'A second Pentecost'

In the vast expanse of Church history, 50 years is a rather short period of time! Thus Pope Benedict has asked us to mark this anniversary by reflecting on the gift of faith and deepening our understanding of the teachings of Vatican II. Those will be our aims during the coming year.

On Sept. 23, 1959, Blessed John XXIII offered a special prayer for the council. He prayed, in part:

"May this Council produce abundant fruit: may the light and power of the Gospel be more widely diffused in human society; may new vigor be imparted to the Catholic religion and its missionary function; may we all acquire a more profound knowledge of the Church's doctrine and a wholesome increase of Christian morality ...

"Renew in our own days your miracles as of a second Pentecost; and grant that Holy Church, reunited in one prayer, more fervent than before, around Mary the Mother of Jesus, and under the leadership of Peter, may extend the kingdom of the divine Savior, a kingdom of truth, justice, love and peace. Amen."

On Sept. 30, a new shrine was dedicated to Blessed John XXIII in the Cathedral of St. James. Stop in to see the beautiful statue and say a prayer for our archdiocese!