

**A
FRIENDLY
GUIDE TO**

VATICAN II



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Title page:
Celebrations in Rome at the
canonisation of Pope John XXIII

Opposite page: Pope John XXIII
when he was Monsignor Roncalli,
Bulgaria in 1925

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 Catholic Church teaches that such councils are convoked under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in order to determine issues relating to doctrine, discipline and theological practice binding on all believers. The form, style, length and structure of councils have

varied greatly over the centuries, often in relation to disputed theological issues that give rise to the councils within the historical context of the time.

Vatican II or the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) is designated the Twenty-First Ecumenical Council, the first being Nicaea in 325. The early councils concentrated largely on the 'Christological' controversies, clarifying in a theological way the unity of Christ's human and divine natures. 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. History also teaches us that councils often arouse great interest and expectations.

Below: Statue of Pope Pius IX in Basilica Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome

DID YOU KNOW?

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

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



POPE JOHN XXIII—EARLY YEARS

Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was born on 25 November 1881 in the small village of Sotto il Monte in Bergamo, northern Italy. He was the fourth of eleven children and the first son to his parents, local tenant farmers. By all accounts, the young Angelo had an unremarkable upbringing. Later, as pope, Roncalli would recall with affection the relative poverty and simplicity of his early years. His primary education was in the local village school. Later, expressing a desire for the priesthood, Angelo was sent to the minor seminary in Bergamo followed by 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 during his relatively short papacy. Much in the journal is consistent with the images of him as pope – kind, benign, humble, open-hearted 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 through a young aspirant to the priesthood. Delving deeper, it details Roncalli’s 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 theological questions of the day.

Roncalli arrived in Rome early in 1901 to complete his studies for the priesthood. There was great intellectual and theological ferment in Rome regarding the use of the ‘historical-critical’ method of biblical studies which was used widely in Protestant circles but frowned upon by Catholic authorities. Roncalli was surrounded by professors and fellow students who wanted the Catholic Church to embrace with vigour this critical study of theology and the bible. The

Below: Birthplace of Pope John XXIII, Sotto il Monte, Bergamo, Italy





'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:

It will always be my principle, in all spheres of religious knowledge and in all theological and biblical questions, to find out first of all the traditional teaching of the Church, and on this basis to judge the findings of contemporary scholarship. I do not despise criticism and I shall be most careful not to think ill of critics or to treat them with disrespect. On the contrary, I love it. 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 (A.G. Roncalli, *Journal of a Soul*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1964, p. 144.)

Here we see evidence of how Roncalli in his journey to the priesthood was shaped by some of the wider historical, theological and cultural shifts in Catholicism. Roncalli's diary entry demonstrates his desire to remain faithful to the teaching of the Church while also responding to new historical circumstances.

As the young seminarian was facing these critical theological issues, he probably did not realise that he was becoming a true historian; for Roncalli was interpreting change.



Top Left: Pope John XXIII (middle) as a young student at the Pontifical Roman Seminary with two friends of the same home-town of Bergamo, 1901
 Left: Pope John XXIII when he was Monsignor Roncalli, Bulgaria in 1927



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