

# The 'pope of surprises' – 60 years later

"Above all, one must always be ready for the Lord's surprise moves, for although he treats his loved ones well, he generally likes to test them with all sorts of trials." Pope St. John XXIII wrote that while on retreat in late 1959. By then he'd had plenty of experience with God's surprises.

One was his election as pope a year earlier. Another was the idea that came to him soon after his election of convening a new ecumenical council, what we now call the Second Vatican Council.

It would be hard to say which of these surprises was the larger one, if not to Pope John, then to just about everyone else.

## Surprise choice

Becoming pope? By the time the conclave of cardinals gathered to choose a successor to Pope Pius XII, a peaceful retirement might have seemed more likely for Cardinal Angelo Roncalli, Patriarch of Venice, who'd already had a rich and full life in the service of God and the Church.

And the ecumenical council? Elected pope as he was nearing 77, John XXIII assumed, like everyone else, that he was chosen to serve as an interim pope, a caretaker of sorts, who wouldn't launch any dramatic new projects.

But God had something else in mind.

Pope John's origins hardly pointed to what lay ahead. He was born in northern Italy in 1881, third child of 13 in a family of peasant farmers. But, a bright young man, he became a priest, secretary to the bishop of his diocese, and, after

that, director of Italy's mission-aid organization.

In his spare time, he worked on a biography of St. Charles Borromeo. Doing research at the famous Ambrosian Library in Milan, where St. Charles had been archbishop in the 16th century, he got to know its director, Father Achille Ratti. Years later – Father Ratti having become Pope Pius XI – he was named archbishop and Vatican representative in Bulgaria.

A quarter-century as a Vatican diplomat followed. During World War II, operating from his post in Istanbul in neutral Turkey, he worked quietly and with good effect to rescue Jews from the Nazis.

In 1944 Pope Pius XII chose him as nuncio to France, an important and, at the time, ticklish assignment in which he displayed a notably deft hand in resolving Church-state tensions over Church schools and the naming of bishops.

In 1953 Pius XII named him Cardinal and Patriarch of Venice – a prestigious post after which he might reasonably have looked forward to a quiet retirement.

But that was not to be.

Following the death of Pius XII in October 1958, the cardinals apparently were looking for someone who would be a change from the aristocratic and, in his latter years, increasingly isolated Pope Pius. But who that would be was evidently not so easy to say, and the voting dragged on for 11 or 12 ballots.

Cardinal Roncalli had come to the conclave aware that he could be elected pope, but also with a return ticket to Venice in his pocket in the likely event that he wasn't.

Now, apparently as a generally acceptable compromise, the cardinals' choice eventually went to him. After all, the cardinals must have reasoned, a pope his age would not be in office very long and therefore not do much of anything to rock

the boat. A new ecumenical council was the last thing anyone was thinking about.

Or was it?

## **Surprise announcement**

As a matter of fact, the idea of an ecumenical council dated back to the 1920s and the pontificate of Pius XI, although what was then considered was not a brand new council but the resumption of Vatican Council I.

That earlier council had met from December 1869 until the following September, when the French garrison stationed in Rome was withdrawn to go fight the Franco-Prussian War. The bishops who had gathered in Rome promptly went home, anticipating seizure of what was then the pope's city by troops of the new Italian state eager to make it their capital. Rome soon fell, the pope declared himself "prisoner of the Vatican," and Vatican I was in limbo.

Early in the pontificate of Pius XI, serious thought was given to resuming it. The pope broached the idea in an encyclical published in 1922, and scholars working at his direction drew up an impressive agenda of possible topics for discussion at a council, including the role of the Church, problems of war and peace, Catholic Action and socialism.

Eventually, however, nothing came of the idea as the Vatican grew increasingly preoccupied with problems presented by the rise of totalitarianism in Europe. Cambridge University historian John Pollard concludes that during his pontificate Pius XI actually addressed most of the "agenda items" in encyclicals or other documents.

The possibility of reconvening Vatican I surfaced again in the next pontificate. In his book "The Papacy in the Age of Totalitarianism" (Oxford University Press), Pollard writes that "preliminary studies" ordered by Pope Pius XII – together

with liturgical changes he put into effect – provided important groundwork for Vatican Council II.

Pope John said repeatedly that the idea of a new ecumenical council came to him as an “inspiration,” and surely it was a surprise to the small group of cardinals to whom he declared his intention on Jan. 29, 1959.

### Openness to surprise



*The “surprising” life of John XXIII was marked by a deep sense of faith and openness to God’s will. A few examples:*

- John’s episcopal motto, “Obedience and peace,” spoke to the serenity one experiences when trusting God’s will.
- His managerial motto: “See everything, overlook a great deal, correct a little.”
- Another famous prayer of John’s: “It’s your Church, Lord. Look over it. I’m going to bed.”

## Left with surprise

Not everyone thought it was a good idea. “This holy old boy doesn’t realize what a hornet’s nest he’s stirring up,” Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini of Milan remarked privately.

But Cardinal Montini came to see things differently. Predicting the council would shed light “upon those places and

institutions where men are working for the union of peoples, for the welfare of the poor, for progress, for justice and for liberty," he presided – now as Pope Paul VI – over its three final sessions and brought it to a successful conclusion.

Pope John had written in 1959 that, along with surprises, God tests his friends with "all sorts of trials." In the fall of 1962, as Vatican II was getting underway, he was diagnosed with stomach cancer. It was his last surprise and his last trial. He died on June 3, 1963, and was declared a saint on April 27, 2014.

A biographer writes of this pope of surprises that he "delivered his message of charity and hope not only to the collective multitudes but to many millions of individual human hearts, where it brought comfort and joy. He was a pastor, and that is how he will be remembered and revered."

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