

Peasant's Son, Catholic Leader, Was Man Of Surprises

By WILLIAM SUNDERLAND

VATICAN CITY (UPI) — Pope John XXIII, the Italian peasant's son who became leader of half a billion Catholics around the world, was a man of many surprises.

He was a rotund old man whose craggy features, ready smile and outgoing warmth inspired confidence and faith. Above all he was human, a man close to the earth who knew people — both their good and their faults.

Pope John learned the harder side of life as he grew up on the land his father worked for another man as a sharecropper. And as a Vatican diplomat he became experienced in a different kind of life, international politics and all its ramifications.

His friendly, open personality stood out even more pronounced against that of his predecessor, the austere, intellectual Pius XII.

According to many, John was to have been an "interim" Pope — a pontiff who bridged the gap between the 19-year reign of Pius XII and the election of a younger man.

But an "interim" Pope he definitely was not.

Not Another Name

The name of Pope John XXIII will not go down in history as just another in a list of 262 popes that began with St. Peter. From almost the moment of his election in the evening of Oct. 25, 1958, the new pontiff showed forth his personality and firm grasp of his responsibilities.

During his pontificate Pope John called the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, the first such gathering in 92 years and the 21st in Catholic church history. He issued the encyclical "Mater et Magistra," an important document on social and labor problems.

And on April 19, 1963, he issued an encyclical hailed as one of the most important papal documents of modern times. It was "Pacem et Terram" (Peace on Earth), an appeal to "all men of goodwill" to work through strengthened international organizations for a peace based on justice and liberty for everyone.

Received Balzan Prize

The encyclical was the capstone of the Pope's constant work for peace which two months later had brought about his selection for the 1963 Balzan International Foundations Peace Prize.

The issuance of the encyclical also coincided with an initiative by the Pope to bring about the release of prelates imprisoned behind the Iron Curtain and to obtain greater freedom generally for the church in Communist lands.

As part of this effort, the Pope received Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's son-in-law and daughter, Alexei I. Adzhubei and his wife Rada, in an unprecedented audience on March 7, 1963.

On the pages of history, such things will mark the pontiff. But for those who lived during his time he probably will be more noted for his tradition breaking ways — if he felt tradition needed to be broken for the good of the church or if it had become outdated in the space age. In some cases he reinstated tradition that had fallen into disuse over the centuries.

Many of the changes he brought about were little, personal things

He began his first days as pontiff following the tradition that the pope should eat alone.

That did not suit his temperamental and he soon began inviting friends. "They want me to eat by myself," he said shortly after his election. "I tried it for one week and I wasn't comfortable. Then I searched through the Sacred

Scripture and found that the

king should eat with his

people. So I began eating

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cluding a 400 mile round trip he took to the shrines of Loreto and Assisi to pray for the success of the Ecumenical Council less than a month before it opened on Oct. 11, 1962.

He even visited the Regina Coeli Jail in the heart of Rome, the day after Christmas, 1958. As the white-clad figure gave his

and his wife Marianna Mazzola

Roncalli.

He was survived by three brothers

and a sister. They are Sa-

verio, 79, Alfredo, 73 and Giu-

seppe, 68, all of whom still live at

Sotto il Monte, and Assunta, 65,

who lives at Sesto San Giovanni

near Milan.

Also surviving were 18 nephews

and nieces.

He grew up in a house of square-

cut stones covered with grapevines

room window he could see the

green valley below and the hillside

sloping down the River Adda.

Tilled the Soil

As he grew older he did his

share of the work — like his

brothers and sisters. He helped

gather wood and helped his father

in the fields. To till the soil was

his apparent destiny in life.

But at the age of 11 little An-

gelo announced that he wanted to

become a priest. His parents, both

religious people in a religious area

of Italy, gave their blessing. He

entered the seminary at Bergamo,

where he studied for the eight

years from 1892 to 1900. He was a

good but not exceptional student.

From there he went to Rome to

study at the Pontifical Seminary.

He received a laureate in theology

and was ordained a priest in the

Church of Santa Maria in Monte

Santo on Aug. 10, 1904, that same

year he officiated at his first Mass

in St. Peter's Basilica.

Father Roncalli's first job was

as personal secretary of Msgr.

Giacomo Count Radini-Tedeschi,

the bishop of Bergamo. The count

had a strong influence on the

young priest, as did the fact that

Bergamo was an extremely Catho-

lic area.

Research Enthusiast

During the nine years he spent

with Msgr. Radini-Tedeschi, Fa-

ther Roncalli started what were

regarded as daring innovations at

that time, such as publishing a

parish news bulletin. He also

taught at the local seminary and

organized Catholic action groups.

Always a historical research en-

thusiast, the young priest spent a

good deal of time at the Ambro-

siana Library in Milan — and dis-

covered 40 huge, handwritten vol-

umes describing a visit by the 16th

Century saint, Charles Borromeo,

to the archdiocese of Bergamo.

The dust-covered volumes gave

a living account of Roncalli's na-

tive region as it was four cen-

turies before. He never lost his

interest in the subject and between

1936 and 1952 published five vol-

umes considered a model of his-

torical research.

When World War I came Ron-

calli was drafted into the Italian

army. He served a year as a

Medical Corps sergeant and then

as an army chaplain with the rank

of lieutenant. At the end of the

war he founded Italy's first "stu-

dents home" for assistance to

middle class students in public

schools.

Father Roncalli also played an

active role in the Catholic Action

movement, which brought him to

the attention of Pope Benedict XV.

Roncalli became a monsignor and

was called to Rome by the pontiff

to play a leading role in the reor-

ganization of the Society for the

Propagation of the Faith—a lay

organization supporting mission-

ary activities. He became presi-

dent of the Italian branch.

Starts Diplomatic Work

During the period from 1921 to

1923 his visits to European Catho-

lic centers for missionary work

helped prepare him for his long

diplomatic service. In 1925 under

Pope Pius XII he began his 27

years in the Vatican Secretariat

of State. He was named titular

archbishop of Aepropolis and was

appointed as apostolic visitor to

Bulgaria.

Msgr. Roncalli, then 43, was to

spend 10 years in Bulgaria, a

country which fell to communism

at the end of World War II. Dur-

ing the long period he spent there,

he learned the language and

mixed well.

In 1935, he was promoted to the

two posts of apostolic vicar and

delegate to Turkey and apostolic

delegate to Greece, with headquar-

ters in Istanbul. He served there

for nine years, during the arduous

years of World War II.

Esteem for him was so great

that in December, 1944, Pope Pius

XII picked him for one of the most

difficult assignments in Vatican

history—apostolic nuncio to Paris.

Relations between the Vatican and

the French government of Gen.

Charles de Gaulle had become

strained because the Holy See had

sent a nuncio to the Nazi-domi-

nated Vichy government during the

German occupation of France.

Thought It Error

The story goes that when he

received the appointment cable

Msgr. Roncalli was so surprised

that he thought he must have

made an error in decoding the

telegram.

When he arrived at