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# **JOURNAL OF A SOUL: A SOURCEBOOK OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL**

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## **1. Introduction**

Angelo Cardinal Roncalli, the Patriarch of Venice, had been elected Pope on 28 October 1958. He made his retreat a month later. Then in January 1959, he made the announcement which was to bring the winds of change to the Church: on 25 January he announced a Synod for the Diocese of Rome, and a Council for the Universal Church. The Synod for Rome took place over a few days in January 1960, while the Council began only in October 1962. It was to last much longer than the Synod.

Shortly before the Roman Synod, Pope John made his annual retreat. From 29 November to 5 December 1959, he made his retreat in the Vatican, and invited Monsignor Giuseppe Angrisani, Bishop of Canale, to preach the retreat. In his *Journal of a Soul*<sup>1</sup> he wrote five points of reflection on the retreat. It is the fourth that I can quote here:

Above all, I am grateful to the Lord for the temperament he has given me, which preserves me from anxieties and tiresome perplexities. I feel I am under obedience in all things and I have noticed that this disposition, in great things and in small, gives me, unworthy as I am, a strength of daring simplicity, so wholly evangelical in its nature that

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<sup>1</sup>Fr Loris Capovilla (transl., Dorothy White): *Journal of a Soul: the Autobiography of Pope John XXIII*, 1980, New York: Image Books. (Free downloads may be sought online). Please note: References given within the text are to this book.

it demands and obtains universal respect and edifies many. 'Lord, I am not worthy. O Lord, be always my strength and the joy of my heart. My God, my mercy' (p. 299).

In this short text, we can see something of the deep spirituality of the man who opened the windows of the Church. Many at the time commented on his personality – he was often called “good Pope John” and other admiring titles – but the personality is the outer experience of the inner spirit. In the text just quoted, we see something of his tremendous sense of freedom. His humble obedience to God in all things enables him to be simply daring. We find a man who has no need of adulation, no need of praise. Yet he is always concerned that his life should edify others, and so the response of the people who are edified by him is a test of this. We find a man who is peacefully and humbly conscious of his own unworthiness. He is content, in a world full of discontent.

## **2. The Journal of a Soul**

To understand the man of eighty years, we must go back to the stirrings of youth. And we rejoice that young Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was an orderly boy: He was born on 25 November 1881, and was a pupil at the minor seminary of Bergamo from 1892 to 1895. In 1895 he entered the major seminary, and he began the notebooks which became the *Journal of a Soul*. He kept most of these notebooks, and must have carried them from place to place on his diplomatic journeys. He was able to review them (p. 273). His final notes were made in September 1962. These notes, over nearly seven decades, are a precious insight into his spirituality. Others can rightly study his many letters and speeches, his academic and historical writings, his encyclicals and his sermons. My small task is to introduce a new generation of readers to his spiritual development, and recommend that they beg, borrow, or buy a copy of the *Journal* for themselves.

Of course, we are always dependent on the work of others. The new Patriarch of Venice chose as his personal secretary Fr Loris Capovilla, a priest of the Diocese of Venice. Fr Loris accompanied the new Pope to Rome and stayed with him all his life. It is Fr Loris we must thank for bringing these notes into the public eye. Fr Loris, now long retired as a Cardinal, is one of the few living witnesses to the origins and functioning of the Second Vatican Council. And for those of us who cannot read the original Italian version, we are dependent on

translators. Perhaps these processes of editing and translation may result in certain losses, but we are the beneficiaries. That is enough.

Pope John impressed those who met him by his lovable simplicity, but we should not make the mistake of thinking that he was a simpleton. He earned his academic degrees, to doctoral level. As a young priest, he taught in seminaries and universities, including Church History and Patristics. He was trained for the Vatican's diplomatic corps, and held some very significant postings. His translator reminds us that he could think in Latin. Even in his 60s, he set himself the task of learning some Turkish. But these things are rarely mentioned in his spiritual diaries.

The *Journal* contains only passing references to the great events of the years and the ways in which Angelo Roncalli was caught up in them. Wars, revolutions and the sweep of armies, the pitiful flows of refugees – we know from other sources that he was deeply involved in these moments of history, but they are not the focus of the *Journal*.

What we do read in the *Journal* is the development of a soul. The earliest writings are rather formal, and we read what might, in another young priest, become a rigid discipline or a mask of pieties. But in Angelo Roncalli there is a maturing to freedom. His contemporary and friend Oratorian Fr Giulio Bevilacqua, meditates: "Thus the formal framework becomes less rigid, the letter yields more and more to the spirit, all effort is unified and directed towards a few clear purposes..." (p. xxvii)

### **3. The Beginnings: The Rule of Life**

Angelo Roncalli was just a child when he entered the minor seminary, and still a child of fourteen when, he wrote his *Rule of Life*, the first notes in the *Journal* (p. 4-12). This *Rule of Life* is rather long, and his editor suggests that it is a personal adaptation of a *Rule* provided by his spiritual director. But his editor, who knew him well, suggests that he continued to keep these rules with him, to refer to them, and to adapt and maintain them, even when he was Pope. The rules suggest a regular discipline of life, with a daily routine, a weekly routine, a monthly routine, and a yearly routine.

The *Journal* suggests that he constantly renewed his commitment to the *Rule of Life*, especially during his annual retreat. A few examples will suffice. One of his daily rules was to read a section of "the very

devote Latin book of Thomas à Kempis" (p. 5). In 1925, during his retreat preparing for consecration as a bishop, he quotes from the *Imitation of Christ*, "all things are to be referred to God as their final end," and he resolves to often read these words again (p. 204). And in 1933, making his retreat in Sofia, Bulgaria, he quotes a passage from *The Imitation of Christ*, obviously still close at hand (p. 221).

The same basic resolutions recur throughout his life. In 1909, he resolved to say his Divine Office in the chapel, before the Blessed Sacrament (p. 173). In 1945, in France, while making his retreat in a Benedictine Abbey famous for liturgy, he renewed his commitment to the Divine Office (p. 265). As late as August 1961, in the retreat preparing for the completion of his eightieth year, he set down six maxims of perfection (p. 311). Thus we can see that he maintained the pattern set from his childhood: keeping a rule of life, but adapting it to changing circumstances.

We should not expect that the young Roncalli had an easy path. In 1904, preparing for ordination as priest, he wrote: "I have not achieved much during these five days," and five years later he wrote: "I have nothing to add or to take away from the resolutions made during the two preceding retreats, concerning my life of prayer. It is humiliating to have to confess the same negligences over and over again, but I am bound to do so" (p. 154 and p. 173). Such confessions are repeated through the years.

## **4. The Middle Years**

### **4.1. Ignatian Discernment**

Most of the entries in the *Journal* were made during his annual retreat. These retreats were usually in the style of the Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola, and as priest and bishop, Angelo Roncalli was clearly familiar with the Ignatian method. His ordination retreat in 1904 was based on the *Spiritual Exercises* (p. 154), and he still had the notes from that retreat at hand five years later (p. 172). When his annual retreat did not follow the Ignatian method, he was interested enough to make a note of it. On one occasion when a Capuchin preacher did not use the Ignatian method, Roncalli was able to fill the gap himself (p. 221).

One of the features of the Ignatian method are the rules for the discernment of spirits,<sup>2</sup> and it seems that he regularly examined his conduct in this manner. Thus, at his retreat in Bulgaria in 1934, he writes: “My soul is tranquil. This year was remarkably calm” (p. 222). We should not interpret this phrase simply as a record of his working days, but as an objective spiritual discernment. In fact, the previous year he had noted that “My prolonged mission as papal representative in this country often causes me acute and intimate suffering, but I try not to show this” (p. 221). Clearly, his tranquillity is not an easy working life, but tranquillity of his relationship with God. We will see this use of the Ignatian discernment again in his years as Pope.

#### 4.2. The Churchman

Angelo Roncalli spent almost his entire life in the structured confines of the Church. With the exception of his military service, he lived in a clerical environment from minor seminary until his death. He had limited contact with the unstructured demands of pastoral ministry: his work was mainly in seminaries, in a diocesan curia, and in the Vatican diplomatic corps. He lived with other clerics twenty-four hours each day, and had little contact with lay people outside the confines of his work. His family called him a prisoner. This could have been a recipe for a narrow, clericalist view of the Church and of his role within it. But in fact, Angelo Roncalli did not turn out this way. He had amazing breadth of vision, and a deep commitment to ordinary people. From the *Journal*, we can identify four factors at work.

First was Roncalli’s growing commitment to simplicity. As a new bishop in 1926, he sought simplicity in his speech, applying the advice of St Francis de Sales<sup>3</sup> (p. 208). He returned to this topic in France in 1952, and wrote: “The older I grow the more clearly I perceive the dignity and the winning beauty of simplicity in thought, conduct and speech: a desire to simplify all that is complicated and to treat everything with the greatest naturalness and clarity, without wrapping things up in trimmings and artificial turns of thought and

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<sup>2</sup>Ignatius of Loyola (transl., Louis Puhl.): *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, 2010, Mumbai: St Paul’s, 91-97.

<sup>3</sup>Francis de Sales (transl., Antony Mookenthottam, Armind Nazareth, and Antony Kolencherry): *Introduction to the Devout Life*, part 3 chapter 30, Bangalore: SFS Publications, 2005.

phrase" (p. 279). He returned to the same theme in 1961, as Pope, writing "It is commonly believed and considered fitting that even the everyday language of the Pope should be full of mystery and awe. But the example of Jesus is more closely followed in the most appealing simplicity, not dissociated from the God-given prudence of wise and holy men" (p. 309). He continued to draw on the simple life lived by his poor family (p. 315).

Second was Roncalli's sense of calling to his ministry, and his sense of duty. As a seminarian he seems to have been solemnly self-conscious about his duty, and the influence which he has on others (p. 73). But this sense of duty matured as he was called to each stage in life. When in 1925, he was consecrated a bishop for his diplomatic work, Roncalli was conscious that his state as a bishop was "a state of perfection," but immediately added that this was a terrifying thought, and led him to being very humble (p. 204). On becoming Pope, he read about the Popes of the past, and wished others would do the same (p. 319). A former teacher of Church history and of patrology, Roncalli brought to his Papacy a rich sense of the history and diversity of the Church.

Third was his openness to people of different cultures, languages, and religions. At the age of 46, he was trying to learn Bulgarian, serving as Apostolic Delegate in a land where there were many Orthodox and very few Catholics. At nearly 60 years of age, serving as Apostolic Delegate in Turkey, where Catholics were few and Muslims in a great majority, he was trying to learn Turkish. Roncalli commented: "I love the Turks, I appreciate the natural qualities of these people who have their own place reserved in the march of civilization" (p. 233-234).

Fourth was his spirit of detachment. In his youth, he was conscious of acting or daydreaming about the praise which he might receive (p. 62-63, and p. 65-66). Through the years, he sought detachment, and in his 1930 retreat he wrote: "With the grace of God, I feel, I want to feel, truly indifferent to all that the Lord may decide for me, as regards my future" (p. 216). In 1933, he made his retreat on the theme of holy detachment (p. 221). By the time he came to serve as Pope, he felt "Total detachment from everything, with absolute indifference to both praise and blame..." (p. 307).

These four factors, each nourished over a lifetime of spiritual struggle, shaped the man who was to call the Second Vatican Council.

### 5. The Pope and the Council

The concluding words of the *Journal* are worth quoting directly. In September 1962, on the brink of the Council and only months before his death, he summarised the graces which he had received. The second was:

To have been able to accept as simple and capable of being immediately put into effect certain ideas which were not in the least complex in themselves, indeed perfectly simple, but far-reaching in their effects and full of responsibilities for the future. I was immediately successful in this, which goes to show that one must accept the good inspirations that come from the Lord, simply and confidently. Without any forethought, I put forward in one of my first talks with my Secretary of State, on 20 January, 1959, the idea of an Ecumenical Council, a Diocesan synod, and the revision of the Code of Canon Law, all this being quite contrary to any previous supposition or idea of my own on this subject. I was the first to be surprised at my proposal, which was entirely my own idea. And indeed, after this everything seemed to turn out so naturally in its immediate and continued development. After three years of preparation, certainly laborious but also joyful and serene, we are now on the slopes of the sacred mountain. May the Lord give us strength to bring everything to a successful conclusion!" (p. 326).

This is a vital assertion from the Pope on the brink of the Council in 1962, indicating his own spiritual state. He does not claim a direct inspiration or private revelation. On the contrary, he sees that the source of the inspiration is within himself, but is an inspiration from the Lord. His repeated insistence<sup>4</sup> that his proposal was his own also counters any suggestion that he might have been a mere mouthpiece for others.

Could the Pope have been deluded by his unexpected election as Pope, or by advancing age? He knew that others were convinced that he would be a provisional and transitional Pope (p. 303). Certainly

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<sup>4</sup>Pope John referred to this not only in his *Journal*, but also in public. See the summary in Baptist Menezes: *The Spirituality of the Ministerial Priest*, Bangalore: SFS Publications, 2011, 203.

his *Journal* suggests that he was alert to such a possibility. He wrote, during his annual retreat in August 1961,

I must beware of the audacity of those who, with unseeing minds led astray by secret pride, presume to do good without having been called to do so by God speaking through his Church, as if the divine Redeemer had any need of their worthless co-operation, or indeed of any man's. What is important is to co-operate with God for the salvation of souls, and of the whole world. This is our true mission, which reaches its highest expression in the Pope" (p. 310).

Surely this is a fine line to tread! It would take a man of great humility and great openness to accord with the will of God, to be able to honestly take on himself the responsibility of setting the three tasks: an Ecumenical Council, a Synod for Rome, and a revision of the Code of Canon Law. And at his advanced age, he must have known that he would depend on others to complete the tasks.

Schooled as he was in the Ignatian method for the discernment of spirits, Pope John tested his conscience. In his retreat in 1960 he wrote: "I consider it a sign of great mercy shown me by the Lord Jesus that he continues to give me his peace..." (p. 301); and in mid-1961, he writes: "My conscience is tranquil about my conduct as newly elected Pope during these first three years, and so my mind is at peace, and I beg the Lord always to help me to keep faith with this good beginning" (p. 308).

And so it was, with a deep sense of his office as Pope, and with a pastor's care for the people of the Church and of the world, that he made his proposals. The rest is history.

## **Conclusion**

Now we come to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Commencement of the Second Vatican Council, and, it is helpful to look back at the spirituality of the central figure, Pope John XXIII. While there is an enormous amount of published work by the Pope himself and by many commentators, I have chosen to look only at the special source of his personal notes, published as the *Journal of a Soul*. I believe that these notes give a valuable insight into the man and his spirit, not available elsewhere. As the Pope is reported to have said: "My soul is in these pages" (p. xvii). The *Journal* is a remarkable work, and can be read from a variety of aspects: my own selection relates only to the decision to convoke the Second Vatican Council.

Certain themes of the *Journal* are particularly helpful in understanding his decision. All of these themes had developed over a lifetime: there are no records of sudden change. The theme of surrender to the will of God recurs frequently, and with ever greater simplicity. This surrender is deeply humble, but not an abandonment of his own responsibility. When he became Pope, his responsibility extended to the whole people of God. The theme of calling to his ministry is repeated at each new stage of his calling. While others may have thought he was provisional or transitional, he knew that he was the Pope, the Vicar of Christ. The third theme was a constant sense of his own unworthiness. Only with the help of the Lord could he find the perfection which he sought, which the world could expect, and of which he had glimpses.

Much has been done to implement the spirit and the letter of the Council's decrees. But surely much remains to be done. Let us take our inspiration from the final words of Blessed Pope John in his *Journal of a Soul*: "May the Lord give us strength to bring everything to a successful conclusion!"