

Prayer of the Month • December 2010

O sweet Child of Bethlehem,
grant that we may share with all our hearts
in this profound mystery of Christmas.
Put into the hearts of men and women this peace
for which they sometimes seek so desperately
and which you alone can give to them.
Help them to know one another better,
and to live as brothers and sisters,
children of the same Father.
Reveal to them also your beauty, holiness and purity.
Awaken in their hearts
love and gratitude for your infinite goodness.
Join them all together in your love.
And give us your heavenly peace.

from *Journal of a Soul* / Pope John XXIII, 1881–1963

How's that for a beginning for this season – a prayer directed to the infant Jesus? This takes away all intermediaries, whether human or divine, and speaks directly to the God who becomes incarnate in this messy world. Christmas time is such an overwhelmingly busy, commercial and family time for us that the profundity of the mystery can easily be shoved aside. It is good then, to clear away the wrappings, as it were, and to gaze on the divine gift and the deeper meaning of Christmas. Peace is perhaps the most obvious thing, and often lacking as we accelerate towards the end of the year. This is a prayer not just for ourselves but for all people, and for people in their relationships – children together of the one Father. Christmas is often about lists and what we want, but before we even open any presents, let us be filled with gratitude for God's unceasing goodness and his undying love for us.

Pope John XXIII began life as Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, born into a peasant family in the small village of Sotto il Monte, in the Province of Bergamo, Italy, on 25 November 1881. He was ordained in 1904, in the Church of Santa Maria in Monte Santo in Rome, and was trained as a historian. Roncalli served as a stretcher-bearer and a chaplain in the Royal Italian Army during the First World War. In 1921 he was appointed Italian president of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. From 1925 to 1935 he was Apostolic Visitor to Bulgaria. In 1935 he was made Apostolic Delegate to Turkey and Greece and was appointed Papal Nuncio to France in 1944. In 1953 he was appointed Patriarch of Venice, and then made a cardinal. On the death of Pope Pius XII in 1958, Roncalli was elected Pope, to his surprise. He chose the name John, which had not been used for 500 years. Being elderly, he might have been thought a 'stop-gap' Pope after the long innings of his predecessor, but he turned out to be a radical reformer, and instituted the Second Vatican Council 1963-1965, though he did not live to see its completion, or its reshaping of the face of the Church. One cardinal observed that he did not know what a hornet's nest he was stirring up.

He was a man of warmth, good humour and kindness, and captured the imagination of the faithful. He died at the age of 81, on 3 June 1963. His last words were: "I had the great grace to be born into a Christian family, modest and poor, but with the fear of the Lord. ...My time on earth is drawing to a close. But Christ lives on and continues his work in the Church. Souls, souls, *Ut omnes unum sint* [that all may be one]."

Colin Lunt