

Sunday, October 16, 2016  
EXPRESSIONS by Father Ed

## Pope John XXIII

This past week the Church celebrated the feast of St. Pope John XXIII, one of the most popular saints of the modern era. Elected at 78 as a care-taker pope, he surprised the Church, introducing a new vision and interpretation, “opening the windows” in his own words. Within months after his election, he announced plans to convene Vatican II which formally opened on October 11, 1962. He died the following June, just less than 5 years as pope. Every pope succeeding him has borrowed his style and sometimes even his substance. Merry Pope John gave up “the prisoner of the Vatican” tradition after the loss of the Papal States at the end of the 19th century, visiting prisons, hospitals, and churches in the Diocese of Rome. Pius XII left the Vatican only once during his almost 20 years as pope. Paul VI expanded on Pope John’s innovation, traveling the whole world, even speaking at the United Nations, the first pope ever to do so. World Youth Day, developed by Pope John Paul II, is a direct result of the precedence Pope John set. Benedict XVI was elected pope at the same age as Pope John XXIII but, by his own admission, too tired and incapable of fulfilling the role, though he remained pope for 5 years. Pope Francis was elected at 77 and will turn 80 in December. He shows the same vigor, enthusiasm, and pastoral style of Pope John.

Pope John XXIII also is a good model for secular leaders. He broadened the role of leadership in the Church, reducing the power of entrenched careerists, and internationalizing the Curia. With the Council, he advanced new ideas, encouraged debate, even dissension, highlighted Biblical and pastoral theology over traditionalist intransigence, and welcomed ecumenical cooperation, ending centuries of mistrust and suspicion. Governments and businesses would do well to learn from his innovative style. During his pontificate, the Church was open and transparent, bridging differences both secular and religious. He met with Chairman Khrushchev of Russia and made friends with atheists. One such artist was commissioned by him to do his death mask and bronze doors for St. Peter’s Basilica.

He presented a more maternal and pastoral aspect of the Church throughout his entire pontificate but also in his encyclical “*Mater et Magister*” or “Mother and Teacher”. Pope Francis does the same, de-emphasizing the more familiar institutional model. Pope John also championed contemporary issues, particularly adding the Church’s prophetic perspective to the dialogue on peace in his encyclical “*Pacem In Terris*”, or “Peace On Earth”. With him, the Church became less a museum and more of an influence. The world noticed and was impressed. We can only wonder if his successors had followed his example if the Church would have avoided the future scandals. Institutions – and people – who place their own interests and survival first are bound to go awry. Pope John XXIII followed a different vision.