

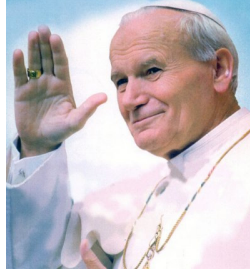


## Was John Paul II the Most Influential Saint?

By Stephen Beale

After I suggested that St. Bernard of Clairvaux was the most influential saint of his time, I received quite a lot of reader mail and comments suggesting that his influence in his time will be surpassed by Blessed Pope John Paul II in this past century. . .

Here's why readers think John Paul the II merits such a distinction:



- **Downfall of communism:** One reader writes: "He brought down the Soviet Union; he brought many people including me back to the faith. I know what Bernard did but I think JP surpassed him by a mile. Bernard persuaded people to go on Crusade but he didn't cause the collapse of Islam whereas JP not only encouraged Solidarity but brought about the collapse of the system that was oppressing people." To any skeptics out there—this is no exaggeration. For any questions about how influential John Paul II was in bringing an end to communism, perhaps even exceeding the role of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, I recommend the documentary, *Nine Days that Changed the World*.
- **Extraordinary public witness to faith:** Another reader summed it up pretty well in the comments section: "His influence goes well beyond his absolutely compelling personal odyssey from actor/athlete to intellectual, to resistance against fascists, to underground seminarian, to priest, to academic and mystic, to bishop, to Council father, to Pope, and his personal example of forgiving his would-be assassin, and his public decline and suffering in faith."
- **Post-Vatican II confusion:** As compelling as that all is, the (same) reader added, we also have to consider John Paul II's role in bringing the Church back from the brink of the chaos of the so-called post-Vatican II "spirit"—a "monumental feat in of itself."
- **Theology of the Body:** "And if all that weren't enough, he articulated a counter ideology to the enlightenment dualism which has led to the moral chaos which is otherwise destroying our culture," the reader continued. "His Theology of the Body is the light which will guide the church in her mission to counter the cultural darkness of our day."
- **A universally recognized force for good:** John Paul II would have been a "world power" no matter what he ended up doing for a living, wrote another reader. As a priest, bishop, and then a pope, John Paul perhaps went further than he ever could in a secular calling, becoming a "force for good that pretty much everyone recognized," the reader said—no small feat indeed in our highly secularized world.

I am compelled to agree: John Paul II is an excellent candidate to be considered the most influential saint of his time. And I'll mention two more reasons of my own:

- **Transformed the papacy:** John Paul II absolutely transformed the papacy, demonstrating that, like the faith it exists to defend and preserve, it's an institution that is at once both ancient and ever new. John Paul II showed that the papacy is an institution that is not only relevant in the era of globalization and information technology—if not more so than in recent past centuries—but also directly meaningful to the everyday spiritual lives of the faithful. He redefined what a Pope is expected to do and how's he's supposed to carry himself in the public eye. And he achieved near-universal popularity and respect on the world stage, while vigorously standing by some of the Church's most controversial and unpopular teachings (contraception, abortion, chastity).
- **Steps towards communion with Eastern Orthodox:** The Vatican and the Russian Patriarch are taking small steps towards improving their relationship, but those could become giant leaps forward toward renewing communion between Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox. This may be many decades down the road, but if it happens, the first steps were taken during the papacy of John Paul II and so he should be credited having the vision to set that process in motion.

But I'm inclined to give history a chance to render its verdict. My guess is the verdict will be in the affirmative, but only time will tell.

## SUMMER READING CHALLENGE

Pick an Encyclicals from each of our two new saints and read them over the summer. You can get the full text at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) or [www.papalencyclicals.net](http://www.papalencyclicals.net).

### Encyclicals of John Paul II

Pope John Paul II issued 14 Papal encyclicals during his 26 year reign as Pope.

- ♦ **Ecclesia De Eucharistia** (To The Bishops Priests And Deacons Men And Women In The Consecrated Life And All The Lay Faithful On The Eucharist In Its Relationship To The Church) (April 17, 2003)
- ♦ **Fides et Ratio** (To The Bishops Of The Catholic Church On The Relationship Between Faith And Reason) (September 14, 1998)
- ♦ **Ut Unum Sint** (On Commitment to Ecumenism) (May 25, 1995)
- ♦ **Evangelium Vitae** (To the Bishops Priests and Deacons Men and Women Religious Lay Faithful and All People of Good Will on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life) (March 25, 1995)
- ♦ **Veritatis Splendor** (Splendour of Truth) (August 6, 1993)
- ♦ **Centesimus Annus** (To His Venerable Brother Bishops In The Episcopate The Priests And Deacons Families Of Men And Women Religious All The Christian Faithful And To All Men And Women Of Good Will On The Hundredth Anniversary Of Rerum Novarum (written by Pope Leo XIII) (May 1, 1991)
- ♦ **Redemptoris Missio** (On The Permanent Validity Of The Church's Missionary Mandate ) (December 7, 1990)
- ♦ **Sollicitudo Rei Socialis** (To The Bishops, Priests Religious Families, Sons And Daughters Of The Church And All People Of Good Will For The Twentieth Anniversary Of Populorum Progressio) (December 30, 1987)
- ♦ **Redemptoris Mater** (On The Blessed Virgin Mary In The Life Of The Pilgrim Church) (March 25, 1987)
- ♦ **Dominum et Vivificantem** (On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World) (May 18, 1986)
- ♦ **Slavorum Apostoli** (The Apostles Of The Slavs) (June 2, 1985)
- ♦ **Laborem Exercens** (To His Venerable Brothers In The Episcopate To The Priests To The Religious Families To The Sons And Daughters Of The Church And To All Men And Women Of Good Will On Human Work On The Ninetieth Anniversary Of Rerum Novarum) (September 14, 1981)
- ♦ **Dives in Misericordia** (Rich in Mercy) (November 30, 1980)
- ♦ **Redemptor Hominis** (To His Venerable Brothers In The Episcopate The Priests the Religious Families The Sons And Daughters Of The Church And To All Men And Women Of Good Will At The Beginning Of His Papal Ministry) (March 4, 1979)

**A Papal Encyclical** is a letter sent by the Pope which is addressed to Roman Catholic bishops in a particular area or the whole world. Encyclicals may condemn errors, point out threats to faith and morals, exhort faithful practices, or provide remedies for present and future dangers to the church. The authority of the encyclical varies depending on the circumstances and is not necessarily ex cathedra. The title of a Papal Encyclical is usually taken from its first few words.



In 1958, a congenial old man, Angelo Roncalli, was elected to the chair of Peter. He was to be a caretaker pope, someone to keep the ship steady while the cardinals identified a more long-term leader. That smiling old man soon stunned the world by calling the first ecumenical council in nearly a hundred years. That was not exactly what the Cardinals had in mind.

But they had chosen a profoundly holy man for the job, someone who'd be declared "Blessed" just a few decades later. One thing about holy people – they are docile to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit blows where he wills, and they follow without hesitation. Don't choose that sort of person to man the helm if you don't want to rock the boat.

Docility requires humility, which is a critical component of holiness in any age. When asked to enumerate the four Cardinal Virtues, St. Bernard of Clairveaux (11th century) replied "humility, humility, humility and humility." If there was a salient characteristic of Angelo Roncalli, it was these four cardinal virtues!

Born to a peasant sharecropping family of Northern Italy, Angelo never lost touch with his roots. As a seminarian, spent his summers working the fields with his brothers. Whenever he removed the white gloves of papal ceremonial, one could see the calloused hands of a peasant.

Pope John XXIII was the first pontiff to allow representatives of atheistic communist governments to visit the Vatican. On one occasion he received a Soviet Diplomat and his wife in private audience. He handed the wife a gift, a beautiful rosary. When he placed the beads in her hand, she exclaimed to her husband in Russian "look, he has the hands of a worker, he is one of us!" Of course she did not expect this peasant-pope to understand. But she was wrong! This peasant spoke not only Latin and his native Italian, but also French, Greek, Bulgarian, Turkish, and Russian. Duty required that he learn them. Duty had also required that he become an expert in the Fathers of the Church and the Reformation, so he got his doctorate in Church history. A highly cultured peasant indeed!

Yet the comment of the Russian woman gave him great satisfaction – he was proud to be recognized as a peasant, a worker, as "one of us."

That highlights another quality of John's holiness that is a model for us all. No one left his presence without feeling that they had something profoundly in common with him, that he was with them, for them. All, even atheists, felt somehow affirmed by him.

This is not to say that he was without principles. At outset of the council, he strongly affirmed that the essence of Catholic doctrine and morals would not change to suit modern tastes. He had strong convictions about modesty in dress, and he frequently reminded those who forgot. In his opening speech, he included strong criticism of those "prophets of doom" who saw nothing but sin and danger in the modern age.

Yet he was always able to distinguish persons from their actions or ideas, and recognize the human dignity of everyone.

His affirming smile let people know that he found something delightful in them, the goodness of God that could not be obscured by their sins or politics. He was always able quickly to find some common ground and build rapport.

He was not liberal or conservative. He was just Angelo Roncalli, disciple and priest of Jesus Christ. The conservatives loved him because of his traditional piety. The liberals claimed him because he was open to change.

Yet there was not a political bone in his body. He was not trying to be "diplomatic." He was just transparently himself. Always. This is why he was chosen to serve in the Vatican diplomatic corps for so many years. Because of his authenticity and integrity, everyone trusted him. He succeeded where others failed, building bridges, reconciling foes, defusing crises. Few know that when the Cuban missile crisis brought the world to the brink of nuclear war, it was Pope John who helped Kennedy and Khrushchev come to a peaceful resolution.

Pope John's ability to get erstwhile enemies talking was part of why the Holy Spirit was able to use him to make Vatican II happen. He made progressives and traditionalists sit down at the same table and work together. When some wished to submit their resignations, he refused with a smile and told them it was their duty to listen to each other and collaborate for the glory of God.

Saint that he was, he took God's work and God's glory very seriously. Yet his holiness prevented him from taking himself, and his glory, too seriously. He had the proverbial "Roman nose," big ears and a waistline reflecting his love of pasta. When he was given a glimpse of himself for the first time in a full length mirror, dressed in full papal regalia, his secretary overheard him mutter under his breath with a smile, "My God, this Pope is going to be a disaster on television

### Encyclicals of Pope John XXIII

Pope John XXIII issued eight Papal Encyclicals during his five-year reign as Pope. Two of his encyclicals, *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*, are especially important. Pope John XXIII's final encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, was written two months before his death. It is long - over 15,000 words - and is the first in history to have been addressed to "all men of good will," rather than only the bishops and laity of the Roman Catholic Church. It was hailed as "one of the most profound and significant documents of our age.

- ◆ PACEM IN TERRIS (On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty) (April 11, 1963)
- ◆ PAENITENTIAM AGERE (On the Need For The Practice Of Interior and Exterior Penance) (July 1, 1962)
- ◆ AETERNA DEI SAPIENTIA (On Commemorating The Fifteenth Centennial Of The Death Of Pope St. Leo I: The See Of Peter As The Center Of Christian Unity) (November 11, 1961)
- ◆ MATER ET MAGISTRA (On Christianity and Social Progress) (May 15, 1961)
- ◆ PRINCEPS PASTORUM (On the Missions, Native Clergy, And Lay Participation) (November 28, 1959)
- ◆ GRATA RECORDATIO (To the Patriarchs, Archbishops, Bishops The other pastors, Peace and Communion With the Holy See; Recitation of the rosary) (September 26, 1959)
- ◆ SACERDOTII NOSTRI PRIMORDIA (On St. John Vianney) (August 1, 1959)
- ◆ AD PETRI CATHEDRAM (On Truth, Unity and Peace, In A Spirit Of Charity) (June 29, 1959)