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Two New Saints

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On Sunday, April 27, the Church celebrated an historic event that was unprecedented in its two-thousand year history. On that date, Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II were canonized by Pope Francis as saints of the Church, the first time that two popes have been canonized concurrently. The vast crowd that gathered at St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican and the millions who also participated in this event by television, radio or internet testify to the great love that these two shepherds of the Church inspired among the faithful. But, each of them would undoubtedly clarify that the love of the faithful should first be directed to God, not to themselves.

And, that is perhaps the most important characteristic of these two very different men. Each of them, in his own unique way, was an image of Christ to the world. Each of them taught, sanctified and governed the Church after the example of Christ, but they also made Christ visible in their own persons through their manifest love and compassion for all people.

St. John XXIII is, of course, most widely known for his calling of the Second Vatican Council. When he was elected pope at the age of 77, it was widely believed that he would be a transitional pope, a placeholder for another, younger pope soon to come. But, his wide experience as a priest, bishop and papal diplomat helped him to recognize the Church's need to reach out to a rapidly changing world. He had a deeply traditional piety and reverence for the apostolic faith of the Church. But, by reading the "signs of the times," Pope John could also see the need for renewal in the Church, a renewal for the sake of evangelization. Pope John's openness to the movements of the Holy Spirit gave him the courage to call the Second Vatican Council, which set the Church upon a path of renewal and allowed her to propose the Gospel in all its fullness to the world.

Pope John also had a warm, approachable manner that communicated the love of God and the joy of discipleship. His down-to-earth personality and willingness to reach out to others outside the faith was a reflection of his earlier experience in non-Catholic nations and his desire to share the love of God with all peoples. Although his papacy lasted less than five years, he was quickly embraced by the world and commonly known as "Good Pope John." In a time of rising global tension and conflict, Pope John also urged the peoples of the world and their leaders to set aside the instruments of war and to embrace the ways of peace. His encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris*, or *Peace on Earth*, was a challenge to the world to turn aside from a path of destruction and toward one of love. His message and prayer for peace are as timely today as they were 50 years ago.

St. John Paul II came on the scene in 1978 as a little known Polish cardinal who surprisingly was elected as the first non-Italian pope in more than four hundred years. But, he soon became one of the most recognized persons in the world. His youthful, athletic persona exuded confidence in Jesus Christ and his mother Mary, to whom he had great personal devotion. At his inauguration as pope, he said to the gathered crowd, "Do not be afraid to open wide the doors to Christ." He often repeated this call to put aside fear and to open the way for Jesus Christ to enter our lives.

In his very first encyclical letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, Pope John Paul offered Jesus Christ to the world once again as the one and irreplaceable redeemer of all humanity.

Pope John Paul became a tireless missionary for the faith, travelling to 129 countries during his long pontificate. At every stop, he spoke out for the dignity of every human person, especially the most vulnerable, the needy and the sick. He decried the “culture of death” that has become so entrenched in the modern world, and he offered instead the “Gospel of Life” that maintains the sacredness of human life and a true understanding of human freedom in the light of Christ. He also strongly defended marriage and the family, and Pope Francis has said that he is “the pope of the family.”

In line with this dedication to the family was Pope John Paul’s enthusiasm for youth. As a young priest and bishop, he worked closely with young people, and later as pope had a remarkable ability to relate to them and their needs. The international World Youth Days, which were begun by Pope John Paul, continue to draw huge crowds of young people and remind the world that the Church is vibrant and young. Another of Pope John Paul’s most lasting legacies will almost certainly be his devotion to the Divine Mercy of Jesus. He preached the mercy of God at every opportunity, and said that Divine Mercy “is the Easter gift that the Church receives from the risen Christ and offers to humanity.” His own offer of forgiveness to a would-be assassin was a magnificent example of the charity and mercy that God had placed in his heart.

At the Mass of canonization, Pope Francis described the two new saints this way: “These were two men of courage, filled with the boldness of the Holy Spirit, and they bore witness before the Church and the world to God’s goodness and mercy.” Pope John XXIII boldly called the Second Vatican Council and set it in motion before his death. Pope John Paul II attended and actively contributed to the work of the Council as a young bishop. He later worked diligently to implement the Council in his own diocese of Krakow and later throughout the universal Church. Each, in his own way, was an integral participant in the Council, which was arguably the most important event in the life of the Church in the last hundred years.

Some commentators have tried to put a political spin on the joint canonization of the two popes, alluding to a mythical contrast between the progressive Pope John XXIII and the conservative Pope John Paul II. To say the least, this is a rather simplistic representation of the important role both of these men have played in the life of the Church. Rather than being some sort of political act, the canonization of these two saints is a simple recognition of what believers and non-believers have known for many years: that they were holy men and heroic witnesses of Christ in the world. Although separated by decades and very different backgrounds, St. John XXIII and St. John Paul II are united in their joyful and courageous living of the faith and their desire to share that faith with the world.

The example of virtue and inspired leadership that we see in the two popes is a great sign of hope for the Church. God continues to raise up saints who manifest his holiness and grace at work in the world. He also continues to bless the Church with humble and holy shepherds who lead his people with the loving heart of Christ. Following the example of these great popes, let us turn to Jesus Christ with confidence, and let us serve his Church with holiness and charity. St. John XXIII and St. John Paul II, pray for us.