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POPE  
JOHN XXIII

Essential Writings



*Selected with an Introduction by*

JEAN MAALOUF

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## Called to Holiness



*Throughout his life — as early as his youngest years to the last day of his pontificate — Pope John XXIII’s deepest desire was to become a holy person. He expressed this desire on many occasions and took practical steps to achieve that goal. Along with profound examinations of conscience and weekly confession, he used traditional tools such as prayer, the liturgy, the breviary, and spiritual reading, especially, the lives of the saints. He also included meditation, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, the rosary, annual retreats, and works of mercy. But above all, with utmost humility, he came to know himself very well, and he knew that he had to trust God and surrender to the divine will. His total abandonment to divine providence freed him from the pressure of the unnecessary things in life and helped him to focus on what matters most: “Our blessed Jesus Christ, his holy Church, his Gospel, and in the Gospel above all else the Our Father according to the mind and heart of Jesus, and the truth and goodness of his Gospel” (JS, 344). No wonder, then, Pope John had to have a “holy optimism” and a good and refined sense of humor that translated his intense love for God, for life, for family, and for all his fellow human beings.*

## THE PURSUIT OF HOLINESS

I renew my resolution to make myself really holy, and I protest once more before you, O most loving Heart of Jesus, my Teacher, that I wish to love you as you desire, and to be filled with your spirit. Meanwhile, there are four resolutions which I am determined to carry out here, now and always, so as to be able to take a few steps forward. First of all I must have the spirit of union with Jesus, the spirit of recollection in his Heart from my first awakening in the morning until I close my eyes at night and, if possible, also during my dreams at night. "I slept but my heart was awake" (Song of Solomon 5:2). My best efforts must go into saying the rosary. Secondly, I must never forget the dictum: *Age quod agis!* ("Pay attention to what you are doing") and always and in all my actions preserve presence of mind. Thirdly, I must observe the most scrupulous modesty in my glances, words, etc. We know what we mean by this. Finally, tranquility, calm, cheerfulness, good manners, never a cross word with anyone, no excited speech, but simplicity, cordiality, sincerity without cowardice — no flabbiness. And I must add: never to speak of anyone, or of my intimate friends, if their failures should set my own conduct in a better light. If I speak at all I must speak with reserve, saying what good I can of them and covering up their failings when to reveal them would do no good and would only arouse my own vanity which lurks beneath the surface and more often than not quietly slips out. These are the fruits of this retreat.

O Jesus, you see the deep desire of my heart to love you, to become a real minister of yours; grant me the grace really to do a little good. Shall I be able to carry out these modest resolutions? O Jesus, I hope so much from your grace. (*Recollection of August 22, 1900*)  
—JS, 75

Today was a perfect feast; I spent it in the company of St. Francis de Sales, my gentlest of saints. What a magnificent figure of

a man, priest, and bishop! If I were like him, I would not mind even if they were to make me pope! I love to let my thoughts dwell on him, on his goodness and on his teaching. I have read his life so many times! His counsels are so acceptable to my heart. By the light of his example I feel more inclined toward humility, gentleness and calm. My life, so the Lord tells me, must be a perfect copy of that of St. Francis de Sales if I wish it to bear good fruits. Nothing extraordinary in me or in my behavior, except my way of doing ordinary things: "all ordinary things but done in no ordinary way." A great, a burning love for Jesus Christ and his Church: unalterable serenity of mind, wonderful gentleness with my fellow men, that is all.

O my loving saint, as I kneel before you at this moment, there is so much I could say to you! I love you tenderly and I will always remember you and look to you for help. O St. Francis, I can say no more; you can see into my heart; give me what I need to become like you. (*Spiritual notes*, January 29, 1903)  
—JS, 110

My obligation to aim at sanctification at all costs must be ever present in my mind, but it must be a serene and tranquil preoccupation, not wearisome and overmastering. I must remember it at every moment, from when I first open my eyes to the morning light till I close them in sleep at night. So, no slipping back into old ways and customs. Serenity and peace, but perseverance and determination. A total distrust and poor opinion of myself, accompanied by uninterrupted and loving union with God. This is my task, this my labor. O good Jesus, help me. "Mary, show that you are my Mother." (*Spiritual notes*, February 2, 1903)  
—JS, 111

What has Mgr. Roncalli been doing during these monotonous years at the Apostolic Delegation? Trying to make himself holy and with simplicity, kindness, and joy opening a source of

blessings and graces for all Bulgaria, whether he lives to see it or not.

This is what ought to be. But these are grand words and still grander things. O my Jesus, it shames me to think of them; I blush to speak of them. But give me the grace, the power, the glory of making this come true. The rest does not matter. All the rest is vanity, worthlessness, and affliction of the soul.

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, my heart and soul are yours, now and forever. (*Retreat of August 27–31, 1934*) —JS, 223

My only wish is that my life should end in a holy manner. I tremble at the thought of having to bear pain, responsibilities, or difficulties beyond my poor capacity, but I trust in the Lord, without claiming any successes or extraordinary or brilliant merit. (*Retreat of April 10–12, 1952*) —JS, 280

I am beginning my direct ministry at an age — seventy-two years — when others end theirs. So, *I find myself on the threshold of eternity*. O Jesus, chief Shepherd and Bishop of our souls, the mystery of my life and death is in your hands, close to your heart. On the one hand I tremble at the approach of my last hour; on the other hand I trust in you and only look one day ahead. I feel I am in the same condition as St. Aloysius Gonzaga, that is, I must go on with what I have to do, always striving after perfection but thinking still more of God's mercy.

In the few years I have still to live, *I want to be a holy pastor*, in the full sense of the word, like the Blessed Pius X, my predecessor, and the revered Cardinal Ferrari, and my own Mgr. Radini Tedeschi while he lived, and as he would have remained had he lived longer. "So help me God." (*Retreat of May 15–21, 1953*) —JS, 283

In the last month, since October 28, when my name and official title were changed, I've had this experience: I hear people

talking about the pope, in indirect or direct speech. For example, “The pope should be told this” or “This will have to be dealt with by the pope.” When I hear this I still think of the Holy Father Pope Pius XII, whom I venerated and loved so much, forgetting that the person they are talking about is *me*, who chose to be called John.

Very slowly I’m getting used to the new forms of speech involved in my new ministry. Yes, I am, most unworthily, “the servant of the servants of God,” because the Lord willed it; the Lord, not I. But every time I hear someone address me as “Your Holiness,” you can’t imagine how embarrassed and thoughtful it makes me.

Ah! My sons — *saltem vos amici mei* (at least you are my friends) — ask the Lord in prayer that I may be granted the grace of the holiness that is attributed to me. For it is one thing to say it or believe it, and quite another to be holy. The grace of the Lord can raise you much higher than his humble and faithful servant; but nothing counts, nothing has value for history and human life, nothing has any value for the Church and for souls, unless the pontiff is holy in deed as well as in title.

My sons, pray for me to the Madonna, Mother of Jesus and our dearest Mother, pray to the two famous Johns whose cult flourishes in St. John Lateran nearby. . . . This is what I wanted to say to you. It comes sincerely from the heart and is a great consolation for me, and for all of us it is an encouragement and a joy.

— PJS, 301–2

I must always hold myself ready to die, even a sudden death, and also to live as long as it pleases the Lord to leave me here below. Yes, always. At the beginning of my eightieth year I must hold myself ready: for death or life, for the one as for the other, and I must see to the saving of my soul. Everyone calls me “Holy Father,” and holy I must and will be. (*Retreat of August 10–15, 1961*)

— JS, 303

Considering the purpose of my own life I must:

1. Desire only to be virtuous and holy, and so be pleasing to God.
2. Direct all things, thoughts as well as actions, to the increase, the service, and the glory of Holy Church.
3. Recognize that I have been set here by God, and therefore remain perfectly serene about all that happens, not only as regards myself but also with regard to the Church, continuing to work and suffer with Christ, for her good.
4. Entrust myself at all times to divine providence.
5. Always acknowledge my own nothingness.
6. Always arrange my day in an intelligent and orderly manner. (*Retreat of August 10–15, 1961*) —JS, 311

### *What Is a Saint?*

Practical experience has now convinced me of this: the concept of holiness which I had formed and applied to myself was mistaken. In every one of my actions, and in the little failings of which I was immediately aware, I used to call to mind the image of some saint whom I had set myself to imitate down to the smallest particular, as a painter makes an exact copy of a picture by Raphael. I used to say to myself: in this case St. Aloysius would have done so and so, or: he would not do this or that. However, it turned out that I was never able to achieve what I had thought I could do, and this worried me. The method was wrong. From the saints I must take the substance, not the accidents, of their virtues. I am not St. Aloysius, nor must I seek holiness in his particular way, but according to the requirements of my own nature, my own character, and the different condi-

tions of my life. I must not be the dry, bloodless reproduction of a model, however perfect. God desires us to follow the examples of the saints by absorbing the vital sap of their virtues and turning it into our own life-blood, adapting it to our own individual capacities and particular circumstances. If St. Aloysius had been as I am, he would have become holy in a different way. (*Spiritual notes, January 16, 1903*) —JS, 106–17

### *The Gospel: Fullness of Holiness*

The Gospel contains the fullness of holiness. It presents it to us in the most attractive light, gently tempered to our frail sight. In these pages we contemplate in fact the Man God, who is supreme, infinite perfection. To the pure and beautiful light already seen in the Old Testament saints, the Gospel now adds the most daring counsels, which raise virtue to the heights of heroism. It preaches worship in spirit and in truth, set free from the old observance, the old Law grown sterile; it preaches the love, rather than the fear, of God, the trustful love of a son for his father rather than the servant's trembling respect for his master. It teaches us to be "poor in spirit," to feel indifferent to wealth, to strip ourselves of possessions we might legitimately keep without ceasing to be good; it means giving our wealth to the poor.

It means simplicity, purity of heart, and humility, even welcoming insults and rejoicing in suffering, forgiving offences, showing charity to our enemies, with forgetfulness of self and self-denial. It may even mean dying for those we love. In short, it is all that is most directly opposed to the faulty inclinations of our nature, all that most resembles and most nearly approaches the divine perfection. This is the Gospel; and besides giving us the fullness of sublimity and holiness it shows us also the continuation and harmonious fulfillment of the historical themes of the Old Testament. —PD, 212

What does the world know of that mysterious force which stirs in the depths of so many souls who seem unsatisfied in this world because they follow another light, an ideal which never fails to attract them?

In recent times, because of a fashion that seems to me a legitimate reaction to certain traditional methods of recounting the lives of holy men (methods according to which the saints were plucked by the hair and dragged out of the society in which they lived, and even out of themselves, to be turned into demigods), we have, perhaps a little too eagerly, turned to the opposite excess and concentrated too much on the study of the human element in the saint, and by so doing have to some extent failed to give enough consideration to the work of grace.

What is a saint? Recent distortions have tended to spoil our conception of the saints; they have been tricked out and colored with certain garish tints, which might perhaps be tolerated in a novel but which are out of place in the real world and in practical life.

To deny oneself at all times, to suppress, within oneself and in external show, all that the world would deem worthy of praise, to guard in one's own heart the flame of most pure love for God, far surpassing the frail affections of this world, to give all and sacrifice all for the good of others, and with humility and trust, in the love of God and of one's fellow men, to obey the laws laid down by providence, and follow the way which leads chosen souls to the fulfillment of their mission — and everyone has his mission — this is holiness, and all holiness is but this.

— *PD*, 44–45

### “KNOW THYSELF”

Man is never so great as when he is on his knees. This is a fine saying, worthy of that great champion of Christ, Louis Veuillot. I must bear it well in mind, and always. Therefore it

is not learning that is really the height of greatness and glory, but knowledge of ourselves, of our nothingness before God and of our need of God, without which we are but puny creatures, although we raise ourselves up to the stature of giants, O Mary! (*Spiritual notes, February 18, 1903*) —JS, 112–13

I wish to speak to you with the utmost frankness of heart and speech.

You have eagerly awaited me; things have been written and said about me which far surpass my deserts. Now I humbly introduce myself.

Like every other man who lives on this earth, I come from a family and from a clearly defined starting point: with the grace of good bodily health, with enough common sense to enable me to understand things quickly and clearly, with a loving disposition toward men which keeps me faithful to the teaching of the Gospel, respectful of my own rights as of those of others, and incapable of doing ill to anyone; indeed it encourages me to do good to all.

I am of humble birth and I was trained to a contented and blessed poverty, which makes few demands and fosters the growth of the most noble and lofty virtues, a good preparation for the higher altitude of life.

Providence took me from my native village and made me travel along the roads of this world in the East and in the West, bringing me into touch with people of different religions and ideologies, at grips with social problems which are acute and menacing, and meanwhile preserved my serenity, a balanced judgment, and a spirit of enquiry. I was always engaged, naturally, with fidelity to the principles of Catholic belief and moral teaching, more with what unites men than with what divides them and provokes conflicts. . . .

These notes give you the modest physiognomy of the man before you.

Certainly, the position that has been entrusted to me in Venice is a great one, and far in excess of my deserts. But above all I wish to commend to your benevolence the man who wishes simply to be your brother, friendly, approachable and understanding. I intend to follow the same course which has served me well till now, and which has perhaps brought about my return to Venice, to live among a noble people particularly sensitive to the impulses of the heart, to simplicity of behavior, of speech, of works, to that respectful and cheerful sincerity of dealings which is characteristic, even if within limited proportions, of the man who has deserved the title of a man of proven honesty, of an honest man without a stain who is worthy of confident respect.

This is the man, this is the new citizen whom Venice has today been pleased to welcome with such festive rejoicings.

—JTP, 84–86

My poor life, now such a long one, has unwound itself as easily as a ball of string, under the sign of simplicity and purity. It costs me nothing to acknowledge and repeat that *I am nothing and worth precisely nothing*.

The Lord caused me to be born of poor folk, and he has seen to all my needs. I have left it to him. As a young priest I was struck by the motto *Oboedientia et Pax* of Cesare Baronius, who used to say it as he bowed his head to kiss the foot of St. Peter's statue — and I have left everything to God and have allowed myself to be led in perfect obedience to the plans of providence. Truly, “the will of God is my peace.” And my hope is all in the mercy of God, who wanted me to be his priest and minister. He has been too kind about my “countless sins, offences and negligences” (Roman Missal, Offertory prayer) and he still keeps me full of life and vigor. (*Retreat of June 2–7, 1957*)

—JS, 291–92

*“I Keep True to My Principle”*

My present: here I am then, still alive, in my sixty-ninth year, prostrate over the crucifix, kissing the face of Christ and his sacred wounds, kissing his heart, laid bare in his pierced side; here I am showing my love and grief. How could I not feel grateful to Jesus, finding myself still young and robust of body, spirit, and heart? “Know thyself”: this keeps me humble and without pretensions. Some people feel admiration and affection for my humble person; but thanks be to God, I still blush for myself, my insufficiencies, and my unworthiness in this important position where the Holy Father has placed me, and still keeps me, out of the kindness of his heart. For some time past I have cultivated simplicity, which comes very easily to me, cheerfully defying all those clever people who, looking for the qualities required in a diplomat of the Holy See, prefer the outer covering to the sound ripe fruit beneath. And I keep true to my principle which seems to me to have a place of honor in the Sermon on the Mount: blessed are the poor, the meek, the peacemakers, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the pure in heart, the suffering and the persecuted (see Matt. 5:3–10). My present, then, is spent in faithful service to Christ, who was obedient and was crucified, words I repeat so often at this season: “Christ was made obedient” (see Phil. 2:8). So I must be meek and humble like him, glowing with divine charity, ready for sacrifice or for death, for him or for his Church. (*Retreat of April 6–7, 1959*) —JS, 275–76

The welcome immediately accorded to my unworthy person and the affection still shown by all who approach me are always a source of surprise to me. The maxim “Know thyself” suffices for my spiritual serenity and keeps me on the alert. The secret of my success must lie there: in not “searching into things which are above my ability” (Ecclus. 3:22) and in being content to be “meek and humble of heart.” Meekness and humbleness of heart give graciousness in receiving, speaking, and dealing with

people, and the patience to bear, to pity, to keep silent, and to encourage. Above all, one must always be ready for the Lord's surprise moves, for although he treats his loved ones well, he generally likes to test them with all sorts of trials such as bodily infirmities, bitterness of soul, and sometimes opposition so powerful as to transform and wear out the life of the servant of God, the life of the servant of the servants of God, making it a real martyrdom. I always think of Pius IX of sacred and glorious memory and, by imitating him in his sufferings, I would like to be worthy to celebrate his canonization. (*Retreat of November 29–December 5, 1959*) —JS, 299

My failings and incapacities, and my “countless sins, offences, and negligences” for which I offer my daily Mass, are a cause of constant interior mortification, which prevents me from indulging in any kind of self-glorifications but does not weaken my confidence and trust in God, whose caressing hand I feel upon me, sustaining and encouraging.

Nor do I ever feel tempted to vanity or complacency. “What little I know about myself is enough to make me feel ashamed.” What a fine saying that is, which Manzoni put in the mouth of Cardinal Federico!

“In thee, O God, have I hoped; let me never be confounded” (Ps. 30 [31]:2)

At the beginning of my eightieth year it is all-important for me to humble myself and lose myself in the Lord, trusting that in his mercy he will open for me the gate to eternal life. Jesus, Mary, Joseph, may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you! (*Retreat of November 27–December 3, 1960*) —JS, 301

As my retreat draws to an end, I see very clearly the substance of the task which Jesus in his providence has allowed to be entrusted to me.

“Vicar of Christ?” Ah, I am not worthy of this name, I, the humble child of Battista and Marianna Roncalli, two good

Christians to be sure, but so modest and humble! Yet that is what I must be; the vicar of Christ. “Priest and victim”; the priesthood fills me with joy, but the sacrifice implied in the priesthood makes me tremble.

Blessed Jesus, God and man! I renew the consecration of myself to you, for life, for death, for eternity. (*Retreat of August 10–15, 1961*) —JS, 315

On this kinship is based the mission and office of the chief pontiff of the Holy Catholic Church, the “vicar of Christ,” as I am called. Oh how profoundly I feel the meaning and the emotion of the “Lord I am not worthy” which I say every morning, in token of humility and love, when I take the sacred host in my hands. (*Retreat of November 26–December 2, 1961*) —JS, 320

## SURRENDER TO GOD’S WILL

It is my studies that are most on my mind during these days. All this really boils down to a question of pride. We think we cannot be really great men unless we are supremely learned. But this is to use the same standards as the world, and we must get used to taking a different view. My real greatness lies in doing the will of God, entirely and perfectly. If God required me to burn my books or to become a poor lay brother, set to do the most humiliating tasks in some out-of-the-way and despised monastery, my heart would bleed, but I should have to do it, and in so doing I should become really great. So for goodness’ sake let us not get too agitated about it. “Not too much of anything.” (*Spiritual notes, February 6, 1903*) —JS, 111–12

The fundamental principles of the spiritual life still hold firm, thanks be to God: to feel wholly detached from my own nothingness and to remind myself that, in the words of the Ambrosian Mass, I am the least of all, and a sinner. I must abandon

myself completely to the will of the Lord and desire to live for nothing else but the apostolate and the faithful service of Holy Church. I must feel no concern about my future and be ready to sacrifice everything, even life itself — should the Lord think me worthy — for the glory of God and the accomplishment of my duty; I must have a great spiritual fervor, in keeping with the mind of the Church and the best tradition, without any exaggeration of external forms or methods, but constant zeal and mildness, with an eye for everything, always with great patience and gentleness, remembering what Cardinal Mercier quotes from Gratry: Gentleness is the fullness of strength. And finally, I must always be familiar with the thought of death, which helps so much to make life carefree and joyful. (*Retreat of October 25–31, 1942*)  
— JS, 259

Old age, likewise a great gift of the Lord's, must be for me a source of *tranquil inner joy* and a reason for trusting day by day in the Lord himself, to whom I am now turned as a child turns to his father's open arms. (*Retreat of June 2–7, 1957*)  
— JS, 291

“Jesus Christ, yesterday and today and the same for ever” (Heb. 13:8).

Not to try to predict the future, indeed not to count on any future at all: that is my rule of conduct, inspired by that spirit of tranquility and constancy from which the faithful and my collaborators must receive light and encouragement from the pope, the head priest.

The source of priesthood is Christ, as St. Thomas assures us (*S.T.*, III, q.22, ad.4): “The priest of the Old Testament was a figure of Christ, the priest of the new law functions in the person of Christ himself.” This must be said in the first place of the pope, both because of the pope's conscience, which is felt to be invested with the presence, the grace, and the light of Christ, and because of the fact that he entrusts everything to Christ, all the thoughts

and operations of his many-sided apostolic activity. It is enough to take thought for the present: it is not necessary to be curious and anxious about the shape of things to come. The vicar of Christ knows what Christ wants from him and does not have to come before him to offer him advice or to insist on his plans. The pope's basic rule of conduct must be always to content himself with his present state and have no concern for the future; this he must accept from the Lord as it comes, but without counting on it or making any human provision for it, even taking care not to speak of it confidently and casually to anyone.

My experience during these three years as pope, since "in fear and trembling" I accepted this service in pure obedience to the Lord's will, conveyed to me through the voice of the Sacred College of Cardinals in conclave, bears witness to this maxim and is a moving and lasting reason for me to be true to it: absolute trust in God, in all that concerns the present, and perfect tranquility as regards the future.

The various initiatives of a pastoral character which mark this first stage of my papal apostolate have all come to me as pure, tranquil, loving, I might even say silent, inspirations from the Lord, speaking to the heart of his poor servant who, through no merit of his own save that very simple merit of mere acquiescence and obedience, without discussion, has been able to contribute to the honor of Jesus and the edification of souls. (*Retreat of August 10–15, 1961*)  
—JS, 313–14

In the eyes of the Lord I am a sinner and nothing but dust: I live by the mercy of Jesus, to whom I owe everything and from whom I expect everything. I submit to him even if he wishes me to be wholly transformed by his pains and his sufferings, in the entire abandonment of absolute obedience and conformity with his will. Now more than ever, and as long as I live, and in all things, *oboedientia et pax*. (*Retreat of August 10–15, 1961*)

—JS, 307

## HOLINESS AND THE PRACTICE OF VIRTUES

### *Detachment*

From the transient things of this world the mind soars to the grandeur of heaven; from the vain glitter of worldly pomp to the serene splendor of virtue. It is so consoling to think of today's saint who, lowly and despised, was found worthy to do the most energetic and important work for the good of the Church. "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (see 1 Cor. 1:27-28), and we see this perfectly exemplified in the great virgin saint of Siena, St. Catherine.

She who thought only of humbling herself and living in seclusion, loving her divine Spouse, was chosen to restore peace to the Church by recalling the pope to Rome. In comparison with her, what are the wise men, the conquerors, the great ones of her age? What a sublime lesson for my pride and at the same time what a reason for confidence in God to whom all things are possible, who makes up for our failings and teaches us to be really great, in his own eyes and in the eyes of the world. (*Spiritual notes, April 30, 1903*)  
—JS, 123

There is no lack of rumor around me, murmurs that "greater things are in store." I am not so foolish as to listen to this flattery, which is, yes, I admit it, for me too a temptation. I try very hard to ignore these rumors, which speak of deceit and spite. I treat them as a joke: I smile and pass on. For the little, or nothing, that I am worth to the Holy Church, I have already my purple mantle, my blushes of shame at finding myself in this position of honor and responsibility when I know I am worth so little. Oh what a comfort it is to me to feel free from these longings for changes and promotions! I consider this freedom a great gift of God. May the Lord preserve me always in this state of mind. (*Retreat of November 12-18, 1939*)  
—JS, 232

This year providence has placed considerable sums of money in my hands for my own personal use. I have distributed it all, some to the poor, some for my own needs and the needs of members of my family, and the rest, the main part, for the restoration of the Apostolic Delegation and some of my priests' rooms at the Holy Spirit. According to this world's judgments, which can penetrate even the sacred inner recesses of clerical life, and according to the criteria of human prudence, I have been a fool.

In fact, now I am poor again. Blessed be the Lord. I think that, by his grace, I did the right thing. Again I trust in his generosity for the future. "Give and it shall be given unto you" (Luke 6:38). (*Retreat of November 25–December 1, 1940*) — JS, 237

Born poor, but of humble and respected folk, I am particularly happy to die poor, having distributed, according to the various needs and circumstances of my simple and modest life in the service of the poor and of the holy Church which has nurtured me, whatever came into my hands — and it was very little — during the years of my priesthood and episcopate. Appearances of wealth have frequently disguised thorns of frustrating poverty which prevented me from giving to others as generously as I would have wished. I thank God for this grace of poverty to which I vowed fidelity in my youth, poverty of spirit, as a priest of the Sacred Heart, and material poverty, which has strengthened me in my resolve never to ask for anything — positions, money, or favors — never, either for myself or for my relations and friends. (*Spiritual testament and final dispositions of June 29, 1954*) — JS, 343

### *Kindness*

I will be more and more careful to rule my tongue. I must be more guarded in the expression of my opinions, even with persons of my own household. This must once more become the object of the particular examinations of conscience. Nothing must escape my lips other than praise or the most mildly expressed disapproval

or general exhortations to charity, to the apostolate, to virtuous living.

It is my nature to talk too much. A ready tongue is one of God's good gifts but it must be handled with care and respect, that is, with moderation, so that I may be welcome and not found a bore.

In my dealings with all, Catholics and Orthodox, high and low, I must always endeavor to leave an impression of dignity and loving-kindness, a radiant kindness and a pleasing dignity. To these people I represent, however unworthily, the Holy Father. It must therefore be my aim to make him loved and esteemed, even in my own person. This is what the Lord desires. What a task! What a responsibility! (*Retreat of November 9–13, 1927*)

—JS, 210–11

My own temperament inclines me toward compliance and a readiness to appreciate the good side of people and things, rather than to criticize and pronounce harsh judgments. This and the considerable difference in age, mine being more full of experience and profound understanding of the human heart, often make me feel painfully out of sympathy with my entourage. Any kind of distrust or discourtesy shown to anyone, especially to the humble, poor, or socially inferior, every destructive or thoughtless criticism, makes me writhe with pain. I say nothing, but my heart bleeds. These colleagues of mine are good ecclesiastics; I appreciate their excellent qualities, I am very fond of them and they deserve all my affection. And yet they cause me a lot of suffering. On certain days and in certain circumstances I am tempted to react violently. But I prefer to keep silence, trusting that this will be a more eloquent and effective lesson. Could this be weakness on my part? I must, I will continue to bear this light cross serenely, together with the mortifying sense of my own worthlessness, and I will leave everything else to God, who sees into all hearts and shows them the refinements of his love. (*Retreat of November 23–27, 1948*)

—JS, 271

## *Humility*

I have a great need of recollection and concentration, and of reminding myself very often of the resolutions I make from time to time. Also, in everything I do, I must behave like a boy, the boy I really am, and not try to pass myself off as a serious philosopher and a man of importance. It is my natural inclination to do that — this is what I am made of: pride! For the rest, I must in all things resign myself to the will of God, bearing with patience and without irritability the misfortune God sends me in my own family, such as the serious illness of my little brother Giovanni [Giovanni was then seven years old].

Let us pray, let us pray always about everything, and may all be done according to the will of God, to his honor and glory.

Yes, “to the greater glory of God!” Amen. (*Spiritual notes, September 20, 1898*) — JS, 45

Last year in May I asked Mary for two things: humility and love. By the end of the month my prayer has been granted, for I had had occasion to practice both. This year I am back at the same point again, and I hope Our Lady will hear me again. She is so kind! To tell the truth, I find it hard to humble myself, but I hope this is an effort for which I shall be rewarded. It all depends on making a good start. Jesus, Mary, you know that I want to please you and to love you. (*Spiritual notes, May 7, 1899*) — JS, 62

The fact is that the more I speak about myself the more virtue I lose; vanity squirts out from every word, even from those which seem most innocent. I must get it into my head that when I am with others, my fellows or my Superiors, the best thing I can do is to preserve a becoming silence, or say only what is necessary or opportune; at least, never to speak about myself unless I am interrogated, and even then to say little and not try to hold my listener’s attention. I must always consider that, because of my faults, I am unworthy to be with my companions. If I think this,

how can I have the courage to sing my own praises before them?  
*(Spiritual diary of December 26, 1902)* —JS, 100–101

My guiding principles remain the same: humility in everything, especially in my speech, union with God (the most important thing, of which I feel an even greater need today) and the will of God, and not my own, in all I do. I must mind my own business, think of myself and the pursuit of the devout life, without undue agitation. Intense, tranquil, and recollected study now; at all times and in all things great peace and sweetness in my heart. *(Spiritual notes, January 1, 1903)* —JS, 103

At the beginning of my eightieth year it is all-important for me to humble myself and lose myself in the Lord, trusting that in his mercy he will open for me the gate to eternal life. Jesus, Mary, Joseph, may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you! *(Retreat of November 27–December 3, 1960)* —JS, 301

### *Examination of Conscience*

A month has already gone by since I came out from the holy Exercises. Where have I got to now in the way of virtue? Oh poor me!

Having made a general examination of my behavior during these recent days, I have found good reason to blush and feel humble. I have found that all my actions are far from perfect; I have not meditated satisfactorily; I have not heard Holy Mass in the way I should, because I have allowed myself to be distracted as soon as I got up, while I was washing myself; I have not paid my visit to the Blessed Sacrament with all the fervor I used to feel; I have made my general self-examination with very little, if any, profit; I have let my thoughts wander, especially during Vespers; I have given way to the languor that the hot weather brings. In a word, I find that I am still at the very beginning of the journey which I have undertaken, and this makes me feel

ashamed. I thought I could have been a saint by this time, and instead I am still as miserable as before.

All this must humiliate me profoundly and make me realize what a good-for-nothing I am. Humility, humility, still more humility! However, in all my distress I can still thank the Lord for not having abandoned me as I deserved. Thanks be to God, I still have the will to be good, and with this I must go on. Go on, do I say? I must start again from the beginning. Well, I will do so. What am I waiting for? “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, under the protection of the Virgin Mary and blessed Joseph” let us go forward.

These points, about which I must be more watchful, will help me to avoid the faults I have already mentioned. Enough! In the next retreat we shall see what stage we have got to! Meanwhile, God bless me. (*Spiritual notes, March 20, 1898*) — JS, 19–20

I think this week has not been too bad. However, I must still reproach myself for not having been sufficiently attentive in class in certain periods, the literature lessons, and also for having sometimes yielded to the desire to play the wit, letting some foolish or frivolous expressions escape me. I have let my thoughts wander in the rosary, been full of distractions during my general examination of conscience, and rather inattentive also in my meditation. Alas! I have slipped back to where I was before. So I must try once more, with more enthusiasm, more attention, more humility. One of my failings is that I am never orderly, not even in spiritual matters, and yet I am always recommending orderliness to others.

I really must make sure that I never tell others to do what I do not try to practice myself, because until now I have been doing just the contrary. For example, those to whom I speak of love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament may perhaps get a very good impression of me in this respect, because I think I speak of this with the greatest fervor. But the truth is that I know I am still a

thousand miles behind, certainly a long way behind all my companions. I must put myself in order. Therefore, when I examine my conscience I will concentrate on one particular fault and pay the greatest attention to it. Now this week I will be particularly attentive in the literature lessons and especially recollected in my meditation, rosary, and general examination of conscience. For the rest, humility always and in all things, especially with others, never speaking of myself in the study circles, nor will I expose the faults of others or encourage others to expose them, instead of covering them up. (*Spiritual notes, June 12, 1898*)

—JS, 24–25

The other evening I had no candle, last night I had no ink, and so for two evenings running I have written nothing.

When I look back over the last few days I must admit that even if I cannot find any serious faults to deplore, I cannot find any virtues either. I am still stuck in the same place, without moving a step forward. I think all this is due to my not thinking about it enough, not comparing one day with another and noting the difference, as my particular examination of conscience requires, which examination, by the way, I ought to make much more carefully. In a word, there are some trifles which never seem to come right or, to put it better, are never done really well: the rosary, to some extent the visit also, and, much worse, the use of invocations.

And yet I am not lacking in good intentions; for this I can only thank the Lord, for it is all by his grace alone. But I must remind myself that hell is full of good intentions. Oh, if I only knew how necessary it is for me to be good and holy! Well, no more of this! Tomorrow I am going to confession, and then I will begin a life of greater application and fervor in honor of the Blessed Virgin, who so greatly deserves my love. I will make a start by never speaking with anyone, even in confidence, of small failings in others, which perhaps I alone can see. O Mary! (*Spiritual notes, August 12, 1898*)

—JS, 35–36

## HOLINESS AND FAMILY

This is what I most desire for you, for I have never wished or implored from heaven for my family the good things of this world — wealth, pleasures, success — but rather that you should all be good Christians, virtuous and resigned in the loving arms of divine providence, and living at peace with everyone.

In fact what use would it be for us to possess even all the gold in the world at the price of losing our souls? Keep this truth firmly fixed in your minds and never forget it. . . .

The Lord wants me to be a priest: that is why he has lavished so many gifts upon me, even sending me here to Rome, to be near his vicar, the pope, in the Holy City, near the tombs of so many illustrious martyrs and so many holy priests. This is a great good fortune for me and for you, for which you must always thank the good God.

But I am not going to be a priest just to please someone else, or to make money, or to find comfort, honors, or pleasures. God forbid! It is simply because I want to be able later on to be of some service to poor people, in whatever way I can. And that is why I would like you to be the first to benefit from this, you who have done so much for me, you whose spiritual welfare is so dear to my heart and for whom I pray every day, I might say every hour.

Will you give me the great joy of knowing that you have all received great good from the holy Mission, and that you have become better Christians than before? I hope this is so, indeed I am quite sure of it, knowing so well your excellent intentions.

Please remember me, all of you, at the general communion. Meanwhile accept my wishes and my greetings, and share these with all our relations and friends. (*Letter to his parents, Rome, January 16, 1901*)

— JS, 329, 330

Excessive attachment to members of one's own family which, when they are felt beyond the limits of charity, become an embarrassment and a hindrance. The law of the apostolate and the

priesthood is above the law of flesh and blood. Therefore I must love my own kith and kin, and go to their assistance when their poverty makes this necessary, because this is an obvious duty for one who does so much to help strangers, but all must be done discreetly, in a purely priestly spirit, in an orderly and impartial manner. My closest relations, brothers, sisters, nephews, and nieces, with very few exceptions, are exemplary Christians and give me great joy. But it would never do for me to get mixed up in their affairs and concerns, so as to be diverted from my duties as a servant of the Holy See, and a bishop! (*Retreat of November 25–December 1, 1940*) — JS, 251

My dear sisters, brothers, nephews, nieces, and relations,

As you see, some news spreads so quickly that the people it most concerns have no time to impart it themselves. So it is true: my humble name is included among the twenty-four churchmen whom the Holy Father, on January 12, will nominate cardinals of Holy Church. I am sure that you will be pleased to hear this: I too am pleased, more for your sakes than for my own.

Take everything simply and humbly, as I do. Even becoming a cardinal counts for nothing unless it leads to eternal salvation and sanctification. The Holy Father Pius X, now beatified, trod this same road, as did Cardinal Ferrari, who will also perhaps be beatified soon. To follow in their footsteps means a great deal to me; the rest, that is, the purple, the human honors, and the earthly satisfactions count for nothing at all.

I admit that this nomination gives me great joy when I think of you, humble Christian people as you are, and of our little native village, and of all who bear our name and are our kith and kin. In these times to have a cardinal in the family does not indicate wealth. I foresee that my material condition will be as before. I shall not lack what I need, but my family will still be living modestly. I too shall always be poor, but poor with honor and dignity. We shall speak of this again. Meanwhile, thank the Lord with me and ask him to make me a good cardinal, a peace-loving

and gentle cardinal, working only for Holy Church and the souls of men. And do not worry about anything.

How glad I am that you, my dear brothers, were able to visit me in France last August! I cannot tell you now where providence, or better, the Holy Father speaking in the Lord's name, will wish me to work during these years to come, which will be the last years of life for me, and for us older folk. I am not trying to find a house in Rome or anywhere else. Everything will be made clear in the coming months, and I can assure you that all will be to my satisfaction and yours. . . .

I beg you all to maintain absolute reserve about this and to behave with your usual simplicity. Beware especially of journalists: the best are indiscreet, even if their intentions are good. They already know quite enough about me, without your adding anything more.

I do not yet know even the circumstances of my receiving the cardinal's title, whether I shall have to go to Rome on January 12, to receive the biretta from the pope's hands, or whether it will be sent to me here so that the president of the republic may confer it. I will let you know as soon as I hear anything.

Meanwhile be calm, good, and very chary of words with people outside the family. I bless you all together. (November 30, 1952)

Your loving  
+*Ang. Gius. Archbishop*  
— *LHF*, 717-18

To my beloved family according to the flesh, from whom moreover I have never received any material wealth, I can leave only a great and special blessing, begging them to preserve that fear of God which made them always so dear and beloved to me, and to be simple and modest without ever being ashamed of it: it is their true title of nobility. I have sometimes come to their aid, as a poor man to the poor, but without lifting them out of their respected and contented poverty. I pray and I will ever pray for their welfare, glad as I am to see in their new and vigorous

shoots the constancy and faithfulness to the religious tradition of the parent stock which will always be their happiness. My most heartfelt wish is that not one of my relations and connections may be missing at the final joyful reunion. (*Spiritual testament and final dispositions, Venice, June 29, 1954*) — JS, 343

Go on loving one another, all you Roncallis, with the new families growing up among you, and try to understand that I cannot write to all separately. Our Giuseppino was right when he said to his brother the pope: “Here you are a prisoner *de luxe*: you cannot do all you would like to do.”

I am well aware that you have to bear certain mortifications from people who like to talk nonsense. To have a pope in the family, a pope regarded with respect by the whole world, who yet permits his relations to go on living so modestly, in the same social condition as before! But many know that the pope, the son of humble but respected parents, never forgets anyone; he has, and shows, a great affection for his nearest kin; moreover, his own condition is the same as that of most of his recent predecessors; and a pope does not honor himself by enriching his relations but only by affectionately coming to their aid, according to their needs and the conditions of each one.

This is and will be one of the finest and most admired merits of Pope John and his Roncallis.

At my death I shall not lack the praise which did so much honor to the saintly Pius X: “He was born poor and died poor.” (*Spiritual testament “to the Roncalli family,” Vatican, December 3, 1961*) — JS, 336

## SAINTS CAN HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR (STORIES ABOUT POPE JOHN)

### *Apprentice*

Pope John found it very difficult to get used to some things required by Vatican protocol. For a long time he said “I” instead of “We” in his official talks. Popes are expected to use the royal “We,” at least on official occasions. The hard task of being forced to use this form of address had come to him suddenly, and it frightened him a little. One day he looked through his slightly open door and saw a large number of visitors gathered in the antechamber. He braced himself, opened the door, and called out to the astonished group that they should please wait patiently just a little longer: “*Dio Mio!* So many people! Give me some time to learn the business of being Pope: Let me practice a little first!” —PL, 49

### *Family Audience*

A few days after his coronation John held a special audience for his family, a privilege granted to each new occupant of St. Peter’s Chair. The Roncallis entered the apartments in the apostolic palace timidly. The splendor of the place troubled their simple souls. Finally, bashful and confused, they stood before the white-clad figure of the pope. In their confusion they dropped their little presents. Peasant bread, ham, and wine, packed in brightly colored handkerchiefs, all tumbled to the floor. John looked at their staring eyes and open mouths. Although the comedy of the situation did not escape him, he spoke reassuringly: “Don’t be afraid. It’s only me.” —PL, 53

## *Zeal*

Ancient, weather-beating oaks flank the path in the higher part of the Vatican gardens, where Pope Pius XII liked to stroll. Nearby stands a fine marble bench surrounded by dense foliage and shaded by a protecting crown of trees. John XXIII liked to go to this refreshing spot, designed in the Italian style of the sixteenth century. Not far away is a miniature grotto of Lourdes sent by French Catholics to Leo XIII for the Vatican gardens. One day John XXIII was accompanied to this inviting bench by an eminent Canadian visitor. To break an uncomfortably long silence, the visitor suddenly asked: "Holy Father, how many men actually work at the Vatican?"

Not inclined to pursue a conversation at the time, Papa Roncalli merely replied, "Half of them." — *PL*, 76

## *Respect*

One day Nuncio Roncalli met the chief rabbi of Paris and used the occasion to show him his respect. It was at a diplomatic reception which included the heads of all the different religious communities in Paris. In a long conversation which followed between the two, they discovered that they had many things in common, especially in terms of their human sympathies. When they were finally summoned to dinner they suddenly found themselves — still talking to each other with great interest and animation — standing side by side directly in front of the entrance to the dining hall. Nuncio Roncalli did not permit the ridiculous game of "After you; no, after you" to drag on. He gently steered the chief rabbi before him, saying: "The Old Testament before the New!"

— *PL*, 95

### *The Hat*

At a fatiguing reception in Venice, Patriarch Roncalli held his hat in his hand. He saw no one among the many guests sipping cocktails with whom he was anxious to talk. He waited patiently for fifteen minutes, which he felt was required by politeness, before he could take his leave of the host. Suddenly one of the men who had arranged the party tried to take his hat. He wanted to hang it up in the closet. “No, no, leave it alone,” resisted the patriarch, “you never know how useful it is on many occasions to have your hat in your hand.” —*PL*, 109

### *Absent-Minded*

During the nights following his election, Pope John XXIII was often unable to sleep. The immensity of the authority he had been given as visible head of five hundred million Catholics around the world brought him deep-rooted cares. He spoke of this later before a circle of visitors.

Many times he would scarcely fall asleep when some worry would seize him and wake him up again. One night when he was abruptly disturbed in slumber in this way, he mumbled: “I must talk this matter over with the pope.” After a short pause of realization he rubbed his eyes and spoke to himself again in a louder voice. “The pope? *I’m* the pope. Well, then, I’ll have to talk it over with the good Lord.” —*PL*, 38

### *Lonely*

A few weeks after his coronation, Pope John confided to his secretary, Capovilla, that he was unable to sleep through the night any more. He felt lonely, and this kept him awake. He needed more conversation and more social stimulation to help him lose the feeling of being deserted. The secretary was silent.

“Don’t you think, Capovilla, that we might send for our good nuns from Bergamo?”

The little sisters were summoned. They not only took care of the pope’s household; they cooked for the entire papal court. They knew what the pope liked to eat: simple, spicy foods. And their broad Bergamese dialect filled the apostolic palace with the conversation which the pope had missed.

But he still found it difficult to spend certain hours alone. He simply could not accustom himself to the habit of eating all by himself, a practice which Pius XII had always maintained. In a very short time Capovilla was invited to join him at the table. The pope’s appetite improved immediately. Shortly afterward he invited the cardinals of the curia to be his table companions, one after the other. Little by little, bishops from all over the world, when they made their *ad limina* visits to Rome, were invited to join him for lunch or dinner.

Once a distinguished luncheon companion ventured to remind John of the solitary eating habits of Pius XII. “Well and good,” John replied. “I value tradition and I grant that my predecessors did, too. I must confess, however, that I have never found any place in the Bible which suggests that the pope should eat alone.”

— *PL*, 29

### *Humility*

John XXIII paid considerable thought to all the problems which faced him. He gave his closest attention to every task or request, no matter how small. More than ever before in his life, John felt the responsibility that had been placed upon him in his position as pope. He did not feel it as a burden, as he often assured those around him, but more as a God-given mission, which he therefore carried out joyfully. For this reason John could surmount almost all difficulties with ease. His goodness used to turn opponents into repentant followers. He could never understand how men who held high office in the Church could complain about the burden of their pastoral and official tasks. Once a man is called

by the Holy Spirit to be a priest, he used to say, he must assume the responsibility to preach and to practice the love of one's neighbor.

In the first private audience he had been granted, a newly appointed bishop complained to John XXIII that the added burden of his new office prevented him from sleeping. "Oh," said John compassionately, "the very same thing happened to me in the first few weeks of my pontificate, but then one day my guardian angel appeared to me in a daydream and whispered, 'Giovanni, don't take yourself so seriously.' And ever since then I've been able to sleep."

— *PL*, 85

### *The Vicar and the Mother Superior*

One day John XXIII visited the Hospital of the Holy Spirit in Rome, which is administered by a religious sisterhood. The mother superior, deeply stirred by the papal visitation, went up to him in order to introduce herself:

"Most Holy Father, I am the Superior of the Holy Spirit!" she said.

"Well, I must say you're lucky," replied the pope. "I'm only the vicar of Jesus Christ!"

— *WW*, 72

### *Pope or Policeman*

In the first days of his pontificate John XXIII received a letter from a twelve-year-old boy named Bruno. It read:

"My dear Pope: I am undecided. I want to be a policeman or a pope. What do you think?"

The pope replied:

"My little Bruno. If you want my opinion, learn how to be a policeman, because that cannot be improvised. As regards being pope, you will see later. Anybody can be pope; the proof of this is that I have become one. If you ever should be in Rome, come to see me. I would be glad to talk all this over with you."

— *WW*, 140

*Shake Off the Imperial Dust*

What did John XXIII expect from the Council? He explained himself profusely on this complex subject. But one day he made a gesture and uttered words that were eloquent in their Franciscan simplicity.

“The Council?” he said as he moved toward the window and made a gesture as if to open it. “I expect a little fresh air from it.”

“We must shake off the imperial dust that has accumulated on the throne of St. Peter since Constantine.” (*To an ambassador*)

— WW, 156–57