

SAINT JOHN XXIII, SECULAR FRANCISCAN

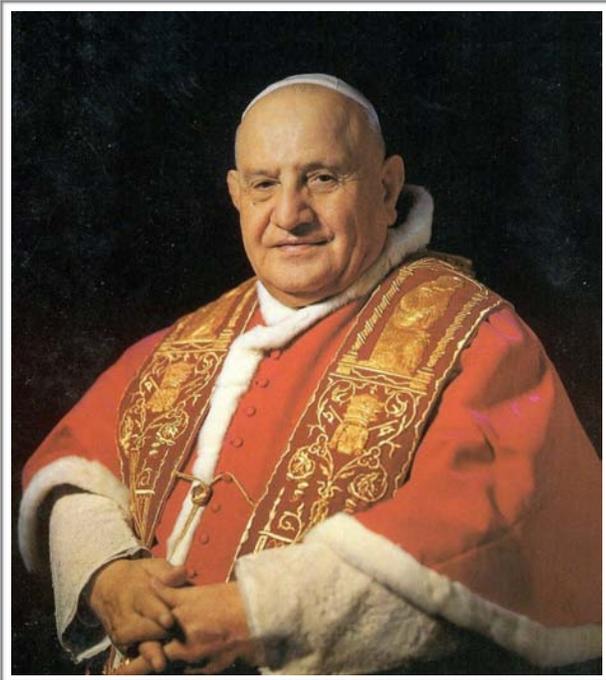
by André Cirino OFM

I once came across a book in Italian that I no longer have in my possession, and although I cannot remember the exact name of the book, it concentrated exclusively on Pope John XXIII and his ties to Franciscan Order.

When I had the opportunity to take a Franciscan Pilgrimage to Pope John XXIII's birthhome, Sotto Il Monte near Bergamo in northern Italy, I translated sections of this little book that show Angelo Roncalli's love for and connection with the Franciscan family. As his canonization draws near, 27 April 2014, I thought it might be helpful for Franciscans to hear a bit more about the Franciscan dimension of this great pope and saint whose short papacy opened the path to *aggiornamento*—to update the church by convoking the Second Vatican Council.

Pope John seemed to be captivated by the Franciscan Order and charism, for he once exclaimed: "What a mystery! What a mystery this Franciscanism!"

In what follows, I share some of his thoughts and memories about the Order's presence in the friary of Baccanello close to his home, about his contact with members of the Franciscan Order, and his love for Franciscan saints and sanctuaries.



Friary at Baccanello near his home A friar minor of the twentieth century by the name of Agostino Gemelli is credited with having said that people don't become Franciscans; they are born Franciscan. And

this seems to be the case for Angelo Roncalli, Pope John XXIII. His family lived nearby the friary at Baccanello. The Franciscan influence of this friary remained with him throughout his entire life.

Speaking to a group of Franciscans in 1961 he said: "The friars minor are the closest to my life, because I also am a Franciscan for a long time! In my family home, when the window was opened in the morning, the first church I saw was yours (Baccanello), down there."

Pope John explained the origin of his vocation as a Secular Franciscan¹ when he was still very young: "I would see the humble and modest friars who edified me very much passing nearby my house. They often invited me to the Franciscan friary of Baccanello to pray in solitude and recollection." He called them a family and compared them to a large tree.

While a young adolescent, he was received as a Secular Franciscan. The guardian of Baccanello said: "He (Roncalli) once reminded me that I am a poor cardinal before being your protector; but also I enjoy the heartfelt sentiments of a humble and faithful Secular Franciscan."

Pope John XXIII recalled that when the bells of Baccanello invited the friars to choir to pray the Divine Office of Sext and None towards the hour of 11:30, his good Mother came to the door of the house and called: "Angelino, Angelino, come because it's time to light the fire to cook the polenta!"

Pope John told us that after a long journey through the world, "nothing was sweeter and more delicious to my soul than to return to the friary of Baccanello. . . especially for the feast of *Il Perdono*," The Pardon of St. Francis. He often preached on the feast of *Il Perdono d'Assisi* at Baccanello.

He wrote to the guardian of the friary of Baccanello in 1956: "Fraternizing with the sons of St. Francis accompanies and sweetens my spirit for the whole year." During a visit as pope to Bellegra friary in the Franciscan province of Rome on 25 August 1959, he told the friars: "At one time I thought of following the humble friars of Baccanello, but then a stronger wind blew me on to another road." And on departure from Bellegra friary, he said: "Too bad that I must go! When I am here with my brothers, I do not think of time constrictions."

On 12 April 1959, Pope John canonized the first saint of his pontificate, a son of St. Francis of Assisi, a poor shepherd of the Pontine Marshes who innately knew

¹ Pope John XXIII referred to himself as a Tertiary or Tertiary Franciscan. I used the more recognizable name today because Tertiary may carry overtones to what today we call the Third Order Regular.

the ways of a mystic, Charles of Sezze, friar minor and lay brother. After the canonization of St. Charles, the pope thought of the friary at Baccanello and sent “the reliquary of St. Charles of Sezze, gift of Pope John XXIII, Secular Franciscan from Sotto Il Monte, to the friary of Baccanello, most dear to him from his childhood.” Dated June 12, 1959.

Contact with members of the Franciscan Order

Every time that he would meet the sons of the Poverello of Assisi, he would call them, with extraordinary and amiable simplicity, *fratelli*, brothers. An entry in his *Journal of a Soul* 30 January 1919 reads: “I have come here to visit Padre Agostino Gemelli of the friars minor, friar and medical doctor.” When he once addressed the Capuchins of Assisi, he said: “Beloved sons, I willingly give you this brief word: when I was fourteen years old, I became a Secular Franciscan in the Seminary of Bergamo.” On 13 July 1958, to a group of Franciscans he said: “I am also a Secular Franciscan; so we are of the same spirit.”

He did not forget the Poor Clares in Paris, Rome, or Venice. He would say that he loved St. Clare and her sisters very much. He described St. Clare as “on fire with love.” When visiting a monastery where there was adoration day and night, he asked which sister did her adoration at two in the morning, and when they told him, he joyfully exclaimed to her: “I too will be in prayer with you.” And he explained that he arose at that hour to pray and work because of the silence and peace.

On 16 April 1959, in the Cathedral of St. John Lateran in Rome, the general ministers of the Franciscan family, in commemoration of the 750th anniversary of the *Rule* of St. Francis, solemnly renewed their religious profession in the hands of John XXIII. It was then that the pontiff opened himself to them saying: “I am Joseph, your brother.”

At the conclusion of an audience with a Franciscan bishop the pope said: “Bishop, now give me the blessing of St. Francis because I am a Secular Franciscan.” And after a personal audience with a friar, he invited him to his next audience telling the people: “Today I bring you two blessings, that of the Pope and that of St. Francis.” And at a papal audience with the general council of the Order of Friars Minor, he said: “I wanted to put the friars minor last on my audience list to be able to enjoy their presence a bit longer.

Franciscan Saints and Holy Places

In a letter to his mother in September 1936, he wrote: On the way home I intend to visit holy LaVerna, the mountain of St. Francis.” As Patriarch of Venice, he led a pilgrimage from Venice to Assisi on 4 October 1953 to offer to the people of Assisi the traditional gift of oil to light the votive lamp at the tomb of St. Francis.

“I have loved St. Francis and his sons from my childhood. I am a Secular Franciscan since age 14 when I received the sacred tonsure. . . .St. Francis was the most intimate of my Saints.” On 6 March 1960 he said: “Let us take St. Francis, the great friend of the Lord, as our model. St. Francis replicated him in his spirit by carrying Christ.”

Pope John also wrote: “The pious and noble Roman woman, Jacoba of Settesoli, was considered one of the first Secular Franciscans who helped the growing Order with all the means at her disposal, especially with the poor and suffering.”

Pope John spoke to people about St. Francis of Assisi and his followers: St. Anthony, St. Bernardine, St. Bonaventure, St. Clare, St. Peter of Alcantara, St. Francis Solano, St. Charles of Sezze, St. Francis Marie of Camporosso, the poet Jacopone da Todi, Thomas of Celano, and Luke Wadding. He began one talk with the expression: “In the sayings of Brother Giles and in all Franciscan poetry. . . .” Speaking about St. Bernardine, he noted: “St. Bernardine is now deceased for five centuries, since 1444. And for five centuries, my humble family has lived at Sotto Il Monte.”

Among his books in his library at his home in Camaitino there were many Franciscan works. In the same place, there was a painting of St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas, depicting the following:

- *Thomas to Bonaventure:*
- “Where have you found such powerful and rich thoughts to fill so many volumes?”
- *Bonaventure showing Thomas a crucifix:*
- “Here is my Teacher!”

John frequently quoted the mystical works of St. Bonaventure, especially his meditations on the life of Christ, the *Tree of Life*. On 20 May 1963 while on deathbed: John had read to him *The Flame of Love*, a work by a certain Friar Thomas (1631).

Conclusion

Bishop Righi who worked with Pope John in Istanbul said of him: “Bishop Roncalli, from the beginning, never had nor wished to have money in his pocket. He lived nine years in Istanbul without having transport for his personal use. He used the tram or taxi.”

I close with Bishop Righi’s comment above because of the overtones it has to our present Pope Francis who seems to be unwittingly evoking images and memories of Pope John XXIII. Angelo Roncalli came from poverty and obviously lived with a sense of the evangelical counsel of poverty, both economically and spiritually. May Secular Franciscan Pope John, and his love for Saints Francis and Clare and the Franciscan way of life, set us afire as we Franciscans continue to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ!