



CLASSIC WISDOM COLLECTION

Secret to Happiness

WISDOM FROM

John XXIII

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Compiled and with a foreword by Donna Giaimo, FSP



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Foreword

I don't remember the occasion or even the speaker, but a story served as my introduction to Saint John XXIII. It couldn't have come at a better time.

I had recently entered the convent and, as a newbie to religious life, was pretty earnest in my efforts to become holy. Equipped with an idealism characteristic of youth, I set out to make myself a saint—preferably in three years or less. Yet the harder I tried, the wider the chasm seemed between the goal and my reality. In the daily examination of conscience I had been taught to make, the meager number of “victories” in virtue compared to the painfully obvious failings left me disconcerted. And anxious. The saints—at least those whose lives I had read up until then—made it seem so easy. Perhaps I was doing something

wrong or wasn't trying hard enough. Or just maybe, I began to worry, I wasn't cut out to be a sister in the first place.

At some point in the midst of all this tormented soul-searching, someone told me a story about Pope John XXIII. It seems that after his election, the new pope had trouble sleeping. One night John woke with a start, his thoughts flying to a particularly thorny issue. After wrestling with it a few minutes, he groggily thought to himself, *I'll have to take this up with the Pope in the morning.* Content with the thought, his eyelids drifted closed, only to snap open a moment later. *Wait a minute. I am the Pope! I guess I'd better take it up with God.*

There was something so human about this incident, and John's disarming ability to poke fun at himself, that I had to explore further. Sure enough, a quick scan of our library shelves led me to an out-of-print book our community had published, *Call Me John*. Released after the Pope's death, the book is certainly a moving tribute to a remarkable spiritual leader. But it was John's gentle humor and gift of holding himself lightly that spoke most eloquently to me.

Take, for example, his quick response to a visitor who asked how many people work at the Vatican. "About half," John quipped. Or the lighthearted way he put a nervous American photographer at ease: "Would you mind

sending me a picture? No one ever sends me any pictures. . . .” Or his dry comment at the end of another trying papal photo session: “The good Lord has known for seventy-seven years that I would become pope. Could he not have made me just a bit more photogenic?”

As I read, I sensed there was something more at work here than easygoing charm. The stories demonstrated both confidence and humility, a certain comfortableness with himself and security in who he was. I wondered how he had gotten to this point. Had he been born with this stuff? A trip back to the library, this time for the book *Journal of a Soul*, provided the answer. John’s own words showed me that through years of assiduous correspondence with grace, he had learned the secret to a happy life: losing oneself and finding God.



Born in 1881, Angelo Giuseppe—the future Saint John XXIII—was the third of thirteen children born to Marianna and Giovanni Roncalli. The Roncallis were poor farmers who lived in Sotto il Monte, near the Italian city of Bergamo. John avoided romanticizing those early years. As pope he once remarked that there were “three ways for a man to come to ruin: women, gambling, and farming. My family chose the most boring way.”

The Roncalli children grew up in a faith-filled home. It came as no surprise when Angelo, nicknamed “the little priest” by his grade school friends, asked to enter the minor seminary at age eleven. He would spend the next twelve years in study and preparation for the priesthood, which took place on August 10, 1904.

A year after his ordination, Father Roncalli became secretary to the bishop of Bergamo and was assigned to teach at the diocesan seminary. When World War I broke out in 1914, he was briefly conscripted in the army, serving as a hospital orderly and military chaplain. His service ended in 1918, and he was appointed spiritual director of the seminary at Bergamo and, three years later, National Director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. Beginning in 1925 and continuing over the course of twenty-eight years, he served as apostolate delegate to Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, and France. Pope Pius XII elevated him to the College of Cardinals and appointed him archbishop of Venice in 1953.

Five years later, Cardinal Roncalli attended the solemn consistory convened after the death of Pius XII. On October 28, 1958, Roncalli was elected pope, taking the name of John XXIII. At seventy-seven years of age, he was viewed by many as a transitional pontiff. He subsequently shocked the world when, only three months into his pontificate, he announced his desire to hold an ecumenical

council for the purpose of renewing the Church so that it might offer a more credible witness to the Gospel in the modern world. Reaction to the news was not altogether favorable. “A council in 1963?” one Vatican official asked, appalled at the amount of work that would be required in such a time frame. “We can’t possibly have a council in 1963.”

“All right,” Pope John responded smoothly. “We’ll have it in 1962.”

Time magazine would hail the Second Vatican Council as the single most important event of the twentieth century. John, who had conceived the idea as an inspiration from God (he sheepishly admitted that no one was more surprised by the proposal of a council than he), took no personal credit for it; he viewed himself simply as an instrument of the Divine will. As such, he was able to let go of his desire to see the work through to its completion. At the end of the Council’s opening day, he wrote in his diary, “With the same calm I repeat: May your will be done with respect to my remaining in this primary position of service for whatever time and circumstances are left of my poor life—and I feel that death may approach at any moment—because the pledge to proceed, continue, and finish [the work] will be passed on to my successor.”

Already suffering from the beginnings of stomach cancer when he wrote these words, “Good Pope John” died

less than a year later, on June 3, 1963. John had offered his life for the good outcome of the Council, and the Lord was pleased to accept his offering.



In addition to the incomparable gift of the Second Vatican Council, John XXIII left us an extraordinary spiritual patrimony. From the age of fourteen until his death at eighty-two, he had kept a diary in which he recorded his journey in the spirit. Published after his death, *Journal of a Soul* ranks alongside other classic spiritual autobiographies. It offers insight into the intimate relationship John shared with the Lord and the process by which God gradually purified his heart. Invited into John's personal spiritual journey, we cannot help but draw inspiration for our own.

In his journal John lays bare his soul, recounting all—grace and insight, his desire to correspond and missteps along the way—with utter confidence in God's continuous action in his life. John was undoubtedly gifted by nature with an easygoing personality, yet his writings also show that interior peace was the result of a journey marked by spiritual discipline, the recognition of selfish tendencies, and an obedience that gave the Holy Spirit freedom to work in him. The outcome? He remained unswervingly optimistic and joyful throughout life, not only about his

own reality but about the goodness he found in the world and in every person. “If God made the shadow,” he is often quoted as saying, “it was to emphasize the light.”

John was secure in God’s love for him, and he allowed that love to define him. He had no trouble grasping who he was and who God was for him: “God is all, I am nothing.” Such an admission prompted humility and trust. It helped him get up after repeated failures and give himself to God anew in a love forgetful of self. It also protected him his whole life from taking himself too seriously, a lesson I have tried to learn again and again since those first weeks spent trying to master convent life.

John had a distinctly playful way of sharing the lesson with others. He once visited the Hospital of the Holy Spirit in Rome, run by a community of sisters. The superior, undeniably excited by his visit, introduced herself: “Your Holiness, I am the Superior of the Holy Spirit.”

“Congratulations, Sister,” John beamed. “I’m just the Vicar of Jesus Christ.”

Christians in every age can use John’s advice (albeit paraphrased) to lighten up a bit. If we spend more time taking God and his promises—not ourselves—seriously; if we tear our gaze away from “us” and fix it on Christ, then like John we will find ourselves in happy dependence on God—a decidedly good place to be. We will hold everything, including ourselves, lightly because we will know

we are grasped and held by God, and that this God who tenderly carries us will never let go. John shows us precisely how to experience the freedom, peace, and joy that come from this kind of knowledge.



I

What God Wants Me to Be

God, who sees me and enlightens me, keeps an eye on my slightest actions, even the almost imperceptible movements of my heart; on my immense poverty, the memory of sins committed, and of innumerable graces, past and present. All these things should keep me so habitually united to God, so delicate of conscience, that I have no need of other motives.

The precious and sublime conclusion of all the meditations of this first day [of retreat] is the great principle of indifference. In theory I work marvels in this regard, but in practice I am the one who makes least use of this

principle. When something happens here that even indirectly touches me personally, my imagination and self-love torment me in an extraordinary way. Yet the keystone of the spiritual edifice is right here: to not do my own will but God's, to be habitually disposed to accept anything whatsoever, no matter how repugnant to my feelings and my pride.

In important affairs there is no difficulty; I will do nothing more or less than what the superiors and my spiritual father call for. The hard part is not doing things according to obedience, but conforming my intellect and my will to the counsel of my superiors, setting aside my particular views—even if apparently fair and holy—as well as inclinations of the imagination and of the other self.

No anxiety then, no castles in the air; few ideas, but just and serious, and fewer wishes. “One thing is necessary” (see Lk 10:42). Golden dreams of working in one way rather than another, fantastically colorful designs of what I can do tomorrow or next year or later—away with all of these!

I will be what the Lord wants me to be. It is hard for me to think of a hidden life, neglected, perhaps despised by all, known only to God; this is repugnant to my self-love. And yet, until I succeed in doing such violence to my pride that this obscurity becomes not only indifferent but

welcome and attractive, I will never do all that God wants from me.

— Excerpt from *Il Giornale dell'Anima*,
spiritual exercises of December 9–18, 1903



My particular temperament, experience, and current circumstances lead me to adopt work that is quiet and peaceful, removed from the front lines, rather than activity that is aggressive, polemical, or combative. Well then, I do not want to become a saint by defacing an original painting in order to become an unsatisfactory copy of someone else with a character markedly different from mine. But this peaceful nature does not mean consenting to self-love, seeking my own satisfaction, or merely acquiescing in thoughts, principles, and attitudes. The usual smile upon my lips must conceal the inner struggle with selfishness, which is sometimes frightening, and, when necessary, embody the victory of the spirit over the weakening of the senses or of pride, so that God and my neighbor always have the best part of me. . . .

O my Lord, I am back today to offer you the precious chalice of my soul, sanctified by your anointing. Fill it with

your virtue as you so appointed the apostles, martyrs, and confessors. Make use of me in something good, noble, and great—for you, for your Church, and for souls. I live, I want to live, only for this.

— Excerpt from *Il Giornale dell'Anima*, August 10, 1914



II

No Humility Apart from Jesus

When I think of the great mystery of Jesus's hidden and humble life during his first thirty years, I am always astounded and words fail me. Ah! It is quite evident that before such a shining example, judgments and ways of thinking—not only of the world but also of a vast majority of clergymen—disappear altogether or seem directly contradictory. As for me, I confess that I still cannot even form an idea of what humility is like. However much I study it, I seem to obtain only a semblance of humility; its real spirit, Jesus Christ's "love to be unknown," is known to me by name only. To think that our blessed Jesus spent thirty years of his life in obscurity, and he was

God. And he was the splendor of the substance of the Father. And he had come to save the world. And he did all this only to show us how necessary humility is and how it must be practiced. And I, such a great and exceedingly miserable sinner, think only of being pleased with myself and congratulating myself over good results, all for a little worldly honor. I cannot conceive even the holiest thought without interference from concerns about my own reputation with others. However much I adopt devotion and a spirit of charity and sacrifice, I can't yearn for the purest ideal without the other "I" stepping in, wanting to show off, to be admired by those near and far, by the whole world if it were possible. And worst of all, when it comes to true hiddenness, which Jesus Christ practiced and taught me, ultimately I do not know how to adapt myself to it without the greatest effort. . . .

I feel that my Jesus is drawing nearer and nearer to me. During these days he has allowed me to plunge into the depths and be submerged in the realization of my wretchedness and pride, to show me my urgent need of him. When I am about to sink, Jesus, smiling and walking to meet me on the water, comes to save me. Just as Peter, I feel like saying to him: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Lk 5:8), but I am prevented by the tenderness of his heart and the gentleness of his voice: "Do not be afraid" (Lk 5:10).

Oh, near you I am no longer afraid of anything. I rest on your bosom, like the lost sheep; I hear the beating of your heart. Jesus, I am yours again, forever yours. With you I am truly great; without you, a fragile reed. I am a column of strength when I lean on you. I must never forget my own nothingness, so that I never depend on myself. Even when I am bewildered and humiliated, I must always cling to your heart with the greatest trust, because my poverty is the throne of your mercy and love.

“Good Jesus, I am always with you; never go far from me.”

— Excerpt from *Il Giornale dell'Anima*,
spiritual exercises of April 1–10, 1903