

The mission of Pope John XXIII in Bulgaria

Who is Pope John XXIII? Why is he called the "Bulgarian Pope" in Bulgaria with respect and appreciation, and what is his connection with Nessebar?



Born as Angelo Roncalli, Pope John XXIII is the 261st Pope of the Roman Catholic Church from October 1958 until his death in 1963. Ten years of his life Angelo Roncalli spent in the turbulent for Bulgaria period between 1925 and 1934. His activity is part of the history of Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Catholic Unia, the Eastern Rite Catholicism and the struggles of the Bulgarian people in the 19th century for an independent church and cultural emancipation.

Let's briefly tell about the importance of the future Pope John XXIII for Bulgaria. Monsignor Angelo Roncalli came to the country after his ordination as bishop in Rome on March 19, 1925, to take care for the improvement of the situation of the Eastern Catholic Christians.

He worked in a difficult environment filled with political disputes, religious tensions and conflicts with the neighboring Turkey. Monsignor Roncalli reorganized the Catholic Church in Bulgaria, established friendly relations with the government, the Bulgarian royal court and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

At the end of the 19th century, part of the Bulgarian intellectuals, who did not accept the intransigence of the Constantinople patriarchy, perceived the unification with the Catholic Church as a means of solving the ecclesiastical-national problem. Thus, in the spring of 1859, Dragan Tsankov proclaimed the idea of a uniat with the Catholic Church, and in the summer the Bulgarians in Kukush showed in action that this was possible. The Bulgarian uniat was officially proclaimed on December 18, 1860, when a delegation of clergy and laity sent a request to Pope Pius IX for a church union. The request was accepted and the act was carried out by the Constantinople patriarchy and the High Porte in Constantinople, which was the first official international recognition of a Bulgarian national institution in the Ottoman Empire, 10 years before the establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate on February 28, 1870. Through this act,

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the Bulgarian nation was recognized as an international legal entity (miletbashi), different from the rummiletta (Greeks). This act received a very strong opposition from Russia and Greece, as it meant to them that Bulgaria is escaping from their political and religious influence.

After the liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire in 1978 and the Unification of the country in 1885, two dioceses with the status of apostolic vicariates were created - the Principality of Bulgaria - the Thracian diocese in Edirne, headed by Bishop Mihail Petkov and the Macedonian diocese in Thessaloniki, headed by Bishop Lazar Mladenov.

In the following years, the Uniate movement experienced a great rise, which began already in the 70s of the 19th century, especially in Macedonia and Thrace. The hope was that the uniat will help liberate the Bulgarians in these territories. According to statistics, in those years there were between 80,000 and 100,000 Uniat Bulgarians in Macedonia, mostly in the region of Kukush, Gevgeli, Doiran, and Enidjevardar. For example, in the Kukush only, out of 1050 Bulgarian houses, 1020 recognized the authority of the Catholic Church. Until 1890, there were no Bulgarian exarchate bishops and exarchate church-school in Macedonia due to the great obstacles on the part of the Constantinople Patriarchy and Turkish authorities, who did not allow the Bulgarian exarchate to acquire its own bishops in Edirne and Thessaloniki. With the gradual stabilization of the Bulgarian Exarchy and the admission of its bishops to Macedonia, after 1895 a process of outflow from Uniatism began and at the end of the 19th century, the Bulgarian Uniat developed in some towns and villages of Macedonia and Thrace.

The Bulgarian Exarchy and the Bulgarian uniat are part of a common national system - when one institution is in crisis due to a hostile political environment, its content flows into the other, and vice versa. This is a unique expression of the Bulgarian renaissance consciousness and political wisdom in the historical chronology of the Bulgarian church and national issue. In short - long before appearance of the modern political thinking of United Europe, the renaissance Bulgarians learned from their own bitter experience how to find a way out through a strategic balance between East and West.

The Macedonian and Thracian Uniats, including priests, were part of the Internal Macedonian-Edirne (Odrin) Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), which aimed at unification of all Bulgarians under the banner of the liberation idea. They were extremely active in the preparation of the Ilinden-Preobrazhensko uprising in August 1903.

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The Macedonian Uniats were brutally persecuted by Greek and Serbian troops and wartime authorities during the Balkan wars because of their Bulgarian self-awareness and Catholic faith. Monsignor Angelo Roncalli did his utmost to help them. The merit of the future Pope John XXIII, apart from the purely humanitarian support for the many thousands of Macedonian and Thracian refugees, a result of the devastating wars at the beginning of the 20th century, is the preservation of the Bulgarian Uniatism. Together with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Uniats guard the historical truth about the Bulgarian presence in Macedonia and Thrace.

After returning to Rome, Archbishop Roncalli made the most of his international connections and influence to neutralize the anti-Bulgarian propaganda and the groundless territorial claims of neighbors to Bulgaria and provided support to the Bulgarian delegation for the negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference after the Second World War.

In the Almanac Album Macedonia, published in 1931 at the initiative of the National Committee of Macedonian Emigrant Organizations, Monsignor Roncali is presented in the "Friends of Bulgaria" section among famous persons, such as Josip Yurai Strosmeier, William Gladstone, James Boucher, Noel and Charles Buxton, Konstantin Irechek, Count Ignatiev and others. A text accompanying his photo reads: "His stay among the Bulgarians is also valuable in that he obtained nearly thirty-five million BGN from the current Pope Pius XI for the refugees from the Aegean Thrace and Macedonia."

What is the relation of the future pope with Nessebar? On 30th November, 1934, Roncalli was appointed the Apostolic Delegate for Turkey and Greece with headquarters in Istanbul and Titular Archbishop for Nessebar. He took an active part in alleviating the fate of Thracian and Macedonian refugees by organizing "papal canteens" in the city.

When Bishop Roncalli was elected Pope at the age of 77 in October 1958, everyone welcomed the election.

Few people know that inspired by his stay in Bulgaria, Pope John XXIII took the first big step towards the rapprochement of the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodoxy. To make this possible, he called something happened very rarely - usually at least every 100 years. In 1961 he convened the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, which included a representative of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Then Pope John XXIII said: "Let us open the windows, let a cheerful breath enter the church."

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As a result of this council, during a meeting between the next head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Paul VI, and the Patriarch of Constantinople, the two left anathemas the two churches had for over 1 000 years. The Pope explained to world leaders the invaluable value of peace and how great the path to dialogue was. He used to gather distant people together.

Under the name of John XXIII Angelo Roncalli has become popular as the "The Good Pope". The other name he is famous for is "The Bulgarian Pope".



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