



Mark Hakomaki

Communal Prayer Praying With Saint John XXIII Open Wide Your Arms to All

by Bill Huebsch

Opening Prayer

Leader:

Let us trace on our bodies the sign of the Cross: **(in unison:)** In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Leader alone, in these or similar words:) Friends, it is possible for us to open our arms and our hearts to all, embracing one another in charity and breaking down the barriers that divide us, no matter how great they are. Let us pray for the grace of compassion.

Prayer:

Oh Great Unifier of Humankind,
you are the one in whom we find our peace,
the one in whom we find our unity.
Grant to us now the spirit of charity
as we encounter one another
in our businesses
schools
homes
and parishes,
so that we might become One in you
through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Learning from Saint John XXIII & Sacred Scripture

The First Reading

(Read aloud, or invite a reader to do so.)

The Church of the early 1960s was one in which there were those who called for rapid and extensive reform in the liturgy, the place of lay people, the role of bishops in Church authority, and the Church's place in society. And there were also others who believed such reforms were not needed. These latter believed that

what was needed was a stronger assertion of Church authority in the face of modern society.

But in a Church which was often agitated by these two currents, one of the progressives and the other of the traditionalists, Pope John surprised both, calling them to considerations above and beyond their opinions, to a sphere where such opinions no longer matter. Pope John was convinced that Christianity had not yet understood all the requirements of the Gospel.

Monsignor Guerry, the Archbishop of Cambrai, gives us an insight into this feature of Pope John's leadership.

On May 3 last year in private conversation, the Pope confided to me his grief that so many [people] of good will in the world thought that the Church rejected and condemned them. Then, showing me the crucifix upon his table, he said with emotion: "But I must be like Christ. I open wide my arms to embrace them. I love them and I am their father. I am always ready to welcome them." Then, turning to me, he said: "Monsignor, all that the Gospel requires of us has not yet been understood."

This opening wide of doors and arms to welcome all people is a requirement of the Gospel that, in the early 1960s and again today, many cautious leaders in the Church fear will ruin all the Church stands for. Pope John opened his arms wider than our human prudence would have permitted. He called all men and women "his children" and welcomed them without inquiring about their status.

When a pope speaks of "his children" he may give to this word different affectionate meanings. He may be thinking of the Catholics who are faithful to the Church, or of all baptized Christians, or of all people in the world, without any distinction. Pope John spoke to all men and women of good will whether or not they were Catholic or Christian. He was so sincere that it was often the men and women outside the church who understood him best, and some of the church regulars who were scandalized.

A paraphrase drawn from Balducci, Ernesto, trans by Dorothy White, *John "The Transitional Pope."* McGraw Hill, New York, 1964. P 31.

Faith Sharing:

(Here direct the group to share in twos or threes for about 5 minutes.)

To whom do you struggle to open wide your arms? Who are the ones you would most like to exclude? Whom do you judge to be generally morally inferior to yourself?

The Second Reading

(Read aloud, or invite a reader to do so.)

One day, while walking in the papal gardens with his secretary, Monsignor Loris Capovilla, Pope John was listening to some of his recent notes being read in preparation for upcoming work. In the course of this reading, and while admiring the beauty of Michelangelo's dome lit by the sun, Pope John stopped still.

A particular sentence caught his ear from St. John Chrysostom, which read, "Christ has left us on this earth so that we may become shining beacons and teachers who know how to instruct; so that we may perform our task as angels, that is as messengers to [all people]; so that we may be adults among children, and spiritual [people] among the worldly, in order to win them over; so that we may be sown as seed and bear abundant fruit. It would not even be necessary for us to expound our doctrine, if our life were in this way so radiant; it would not be necessary to have recourse to words if our deeds gave such testimony. There would be no pagans if we all behaved like real Christians."

There were a few moments of silence. Then Pope John said, "This is the truth. Anyone who asks what are the characteristic lines of my pontificate may be answered with this or with other similar words. That is all there is to it."

Taken from: Balducci, Ernesto, trans by Dorothy White, *John "The Transitional Pope."* McGraw Hill, New York, 1964. P 32-33.

Reading from Scripture: (Read aloud, or invite a reader to do so.)

Passing along, Jesus saw a man at his work collecting taxes. His name was Matthew. Jesus said, "Come along with me." Matthew stood up and followed him.

Later when Jesus was eating supper at Matthew's house with his close followers, a lot of disreputable characters came and joined them. When the Pharisees saw him keeping this kind of company, they had a fit, and lit into Jesus' followers. "What kind of example is this from your Teacher, acting cozy with crooks and riffraff?"

Jesus, overhearing, shot back, "Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? Go figure out what this Scripture means: 'I'm after mercy, not religion.' I'm here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders" (Matthew 9:9-13 The Message).



Breaking Open the Word

What words or phrases struck you in this reading?

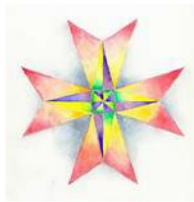
How do these words touch your life?

What hope do these words bring to you?

Activity Suggestions

(Offer the group suggestions for actions as part of their prayer.)

1. In your faith community, who is on the guest list and who is not? Who is invited to the table and who is not? Ask your community to give formal reflection to this question in light of the spirit of Pope John's mission to open his arms, and those of the Church, to all.
2. What do you most fear will result from a more open policy toward those who are not welcomed to your community table? Talk with a friend about which of these fears is the most prominent for you:
 - a. You fear the Church will be less perfect if everyone is allowed in.
 - b. You fear God will be angry if we loosen our rules.
 - c. You fear not everyone will ever understand how deep your faith is.
 - d. You fear the rule-breakers will have a bad effect on others.
 - e. You fear the Gospel will be compromised.
 - f. You fear God doesn't want those others in this Church.
3. Search the Gospels from this point of view and develop a description of what you think the attitude of Jesus might have been in this situation. Who would have been on his guest list? Who would not have been on his guest list?



Closing Prayer

Closing Prayer:

(Pray aloud together.)

Oh Divine Source of Love,
we pray for the grace of openness
that comes only from you
so that we might welcome to our tables
those brothers and sisters
who do not now belong to us.
Grant us the courage of our convictions
as we establish your Reign in our times
and open wide our doors to Christ. Amen.