Over the course of our lives, one of the most important things for us to move forward is change; meaning we want to, ideally, change for the better and never be fully satisfied with reaching the “finish line” so to speak; meaning as people of hope, we want to daily strive to make ourselves, the Church, and the world a better place. And the Holy Spirit is instrumental in this, doing so much to help us on our journey.

There are so many ways the Holy Spirit fosters this, and when I think of the life of Saint John XXIII, who convened the Second Vatican Council, it’s hard not to think about how the Holy Spirit worked through both him and the Council.

The twentieth century was an amazing century with an increased quality of life, but it was also a century filled with horrible wars that killed millions and with evil leaders; and technology brought us wonderful inventions that made life easier and more enjoyable, but it also brought us weapons that could wipe out half the earth, if they were ever used.

With so much possibility for good and evil, the twentieth century was a time that needed good leaders who could look at the past, present, and future and make good, prudent decisions. Even the church needed leaders like that. And just when we needed it most, God gave us a gift: Pope John XXIII, who was pope for only a short time (1959 to 1963) but who had an amazing impact on the church and the entire world.

John XXIII was of course not the name he was born with. His parents named him Angelo—Angelo Roncalli, born in 1881 in the northern part of Italy. His family farmed for a living, and Angelo was the oldest boy of twelve brothers and sisters.

When he was a teenager, Angelo decided he wanted to be a priest. He studied in the seminary, where he was most interested in the history of the Church. After he was ordained a priest, Angelo expected nothing more out of the rest of his life than that of a normal parish priest back in the part of Italy where he’d grown up. It was what he knew and what he thought God was calling him to. But very soon, it became clear that God had other plans for Angelo.

Over the course of his career, Fr. Angelo held many jobs, some exciting, some difficult. He was a secretary to a bishop for 10 years. He served as a medical worker in battlefields during World War I, where he was a stretcher-bearer, and this gave him a first-hand knowledge about war. In 1921 he was made national directory in Italy of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, and also taught at a seminary in Rome. and he never forgot the suffering he witnessed there.

As a papal diplomat starting in 1925, he represented the Church in countries like Bulgaria and Turkey, countries where there were hardly any Catholics, and it was really important to understand and get along with people of different religions. He also had a care for all people; and with the help of Germany’s ambassador to Turkey, Archbishop Roncalli helped save an estimated 24,000 Jewish people.

He was named a cardinal and appointed patriarch of Venice in 1953 at the age of 71. For all he knew, would spend the rest of his life simply tending to the needs of the people of Venice.

But once again, God had something else in mind. In 1958, Pope Pius XII died, and all the cardinals of the church gathered to elect a replacement. Much to everyone's surprise, they elected Angelo Roncalli of Venice. He was seventy-six years old.

Observers felt after a long pontificate, he would be a so-called "caretaker pope," to just hold the fort until God called him home and a younger, more energetic man could get things going.

Not quite. Angelo—who was now Pope John XXIII—had plenty of energy and plenty of ideas. The time for action was now. The Spirit was calling, and Pope John XXIII, thinking of the past, present, and future, was going to answer

"When the cardinals of the Holy Roman Church chose me," Pope John once said, "everyone was convinced that I would be a provisional and transitional pope. Yet here I am . . . with an immense program of work in front of me to be carried out before the eyes of the whole world."

The decision to convene the Council came as a surprise to John XXIII himself. As he testified numerous times, the idea came to him as a revelation from the Holy Spirit. As he prayed and looked at the world, John sensed that the Spirit wanted to blow fresh winds of renewal upon the Church and the world. He felt that a spirit of negativity had settled on the Church, and he was convinced that the "habit of thinking ill of everything and everyone" had to be confronted and changed.

Rather than look at the world as a battleground of good versus evil, John XXIII saw it as an immense flock of sheep and himself as its universal shepherd, leading them home to the Lord. With a shepherd's heart, he longed to reach out to everyone, especially those who were suffering or oppressed. All the changes and reforms that the Council initiated, both under John and under his successor Paul VI, had one single goal: that the Church would become a powerful light to the world.

First of all, John XXIII knew that times had changed, and it was time for popes to stop acting like royalty, which they had been doing for too many years. John was supposed to wear a big, jeweled tiara on his head. He wore it twice. When he went from place to place, he was supposed to sit in a special chair that would be hoisted up onto the shoulders of men who would then carry him. Even though John was a large man and being carried would have been easier than walking, he usually preferred to walk. Reporters had to interview the previous pope while on their knees in front of him. John stopped that right away. He was the bishop of Rome, so he acted like it, going into the city of Rome and mingling with people. In fact, he very first Christmas he was pope, John visited two children's hospitals in Rome, spending time with sick children, something that people could remember no other pope doing before. During a

conversation with a friend and secretary he said, "…Father Loris, my mother taught me that for the holidays we must not only go to Mass, but we must also do works of mercy."

When the secretary asked what he wanted to do, John XXIII replied: "The day of Christmas I will go to the children in Bambino Gesu Hospital. And Dec. 26, I'm going to visit the prisoners of the Regina Coeli Prison." (Something we'd see Pope Francis do too on Holy Thursday Masses).

Noting that it was the first time a Pope had traveled to the hospital there was "great excitement," and when he arrived, "the children all jumped from their beds to go and meet the Pope, and the Pope greeted them all good-naturedly, as Jesus with the children."

However, seeing that there was one child who remained in his bed, the cardinal revealed that the Pope "was the one to approach the child," who, when he sensed someone close, stretched out and touched the pontiff, asking, "Are you the Pope?"

When John XXIII replied with a "Yes," the child told him: "I am happy, but I can't see you because I am blind," to which the Pope responded by "lowering his eyes" and calling the child by his name, saying: "Carmine, we are all a little blind; we pray to the Lord to give us the sight of the heart to recognize ourselves as brothers."

John knew that the Spirit had called him to serve the people of God, not to act like a prince among them. As such he was active in the world; he worked to defuse the Cuban Missile Crisis; of course convened Vatican II which looked at how we relate in the world; he wrote two encyclicals. He wanted was to open the church up to the world so that the church could spread the good news of Jesus 'love in a way that made sense to people of the new century. It wasn't the Middle Ages anymore. It was the twentieth century. John wanted the whole world to be able to hear the Good News in twentieth-century words. As such, he embraced the Holy Spirit.

He had a vision and hope. He looked to the past, present, and future in making his decision to lead the Church in that direction. In his words: "Consult not your fears but your hopes and your dreams. Think not about your frustrations, but about your unfulfilled potential. Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in, but with what it is still possible for you to do." This is how the Holy Spirit works in us and the Church - helping make all things possible.

One of the images of the Holy Spirit is that of wind, and you can't see wind but you can certainly feel it. Perhaps you've heard of the term "winds of change." Fire is another image, and fire can be destructive but also healthy; a forest needs a fire every so often to allow more healthy growth to take place. And so it is with you and me. Good Pope John used his life to make a difference in the world, once we are still feeling and his message - in particular about how sometimes we look at everyone with suspicion rather than as seeing one another as sheep who need to be loved and guided - is so timely. The Spirit gives us various tools, and Paul speaks about these as fruits, noted in

Galatians 5:22; and while not in our readings this cycle, they are great to think about as they help us to truly grow.

The first is love, the highest form of love for God and neighbor. This is the Holy Spirit; the chain if you will connecting Father and Son. This is selfless love, focusing on the other person. So we ask ourselves how today did I will the good of the other? How do I love as God loves. It's first; even more so than knowing the catechism or coming to Mass, because these things flow from that. It's what is primary which is how John XXIII operated.

Then there is joy, an interior contentment that comes from being close to God and in right relationship with others. We need to ask ourselves are we joyful people? We all have bad days, and sometimes you get energy from being around people or like me you get a little more energy as an introvert from being in the woods or with your dog. Personalities differ. But the joyful person smiles and lifts people up. There are people who are just always crabby and suck the life out of a room; some go to Mass every week or day and pray, but you wouldn't know it because they are perpetually negative and crabby. We need to see how we are doing here and seek out joyful people because they lift us up. It's not emotional giddiness but a joy from abiding in the Lord

Then there is peace. It's harmony and a sense of order and calm; with peace we have things at right in our relationships with others, in the different parts of our life, public and private. A person at peace can be honest with others, is content with their job and place in life, and with themselves. We all have stress even if we love our jobs or our family situation. But if we aren't at peace, it could be a sign of anxiety or a need to talk through things, or a sign that something is off; that we are letting something go that could be sinful; that we aren't happy in our job; that we are kicking the can down the road in terms of a need to address something or somebody in our lives. Peace brings about interior unity and harmony which is so important.

The fourth is patience; the virtue of suffering interruption or delay with composure. It takes many forms. I think of Pope John XXIII or any pope or bishop dealing with squabbles in the Church from people with strong opinions. There is the daily patience of dealing with the family, things at work, traffic. There is the patience with ourselves as we try to better ourselves. And there is patience with trying to help someone see the truth, or dealing with difficult people. A little bit of patience can go a long way when we are trying to better ourselves, one another and the world.

Paul then speaks of kindness or gentleness; a warm and friendly disposition towards others. Little gestures go a long way be it holding a door, letting someone merge in, saying something positive, or doing a random act of love for someone. As evidenced by Saint John XXIII's time visiting the imprisoned and children in hospital, a kind act can do so much to change a life.

Generosity is another fruit of the Spirit which is having a big-heart; it means sharing of our time and talent with family and friends and also strangers and to people in need. The paradox is the more generous we are, the more rich we become.

Lastly there is self-control; defined as mastery despite the circumstances we might be in. Being cool, calm and collected and even-tempered. When we have self-control, we can avoid acting rashly. We can control our sensual desires with respect to use of things like alcohol, and how we view the human body. It's not repression but controlling passions and preoccupations so we can be a vehicle of love to others. It takes many forms; it is refraining from blowing up at a family member or when we don't get our way; it's saying "no" to certain behaviors for the greater good; it's not lashing out when we get angry or saying hurtful things; it's proceeding with caution and thinking things through when we have a decision to make.

As we celebrate the birthday of the Church and the Holy Spirit this Pentecost Sunday, we remember we are sent and have a job to do in the world. It's not easy, and at times we stumble and fall - but God is there not just with mercy, but with the tools we need to better ourselves and one another. Let's use these gifts and not take them for granted. Let's be open to the influence of the Holy Spirit remembering we are here on earth for a reason. May the Holy Spirit open our eyes so we know what needs to be done, and may we use our gifts to truly go and make a difference in our world.

Saint John XXIII, Pray for Us!