In The Footsteps of Saint John XXIII:  
A Pilgrimage of Renewal & Hope

10 days / 8 nights

The Second Vatican Council, 1962-65, has been called the “greatest religious event of the Twentieth Century” (St. John Paul II). Yet few Catholics have read the Council’s documents or understand its vision balancing renewal (aggiornamento) with Living Tradition. For most Catholics, Vatican II remains “The Greatest Story NEVER Told!” Stand in the light of this great Council by walking in the footsteps of its visionary and Spirit-filled architect, St. John XXIII. From his humble beginnings on the northern Lombard plains of Italy to his unprecedented ecumenical Council, walk with St. John XXIII and consider how the renewal of Faith in your life and in our parish should continue today!

Day 1: Departure from the USA
The best preparation for the new millennium can only be expressed in a renewed commitment to apply as faithfully as possible, the teachings of Vatican II to the life of every individual and of the whole Church. (Tertio Millenio Adveniente)

Our pilgrimage begins with an overnight flight to Milan, Italy.

Day 2: Arrival to Milan
What a wonder it is! So grand, so solemn, so vast! And yet so delicate, so airy, so graceful! (Mark Twain describing the Milan Duomo from Innocents Abroad).

We begin this morning with a guided tour of Milan, Italy's business hub and a great draw to many throughout history, from St. Ambrose and Leonardo da Vinci, to the waves of immigrants who fueled its growth in the second half of the 20th century. Here we will visit the largest Gothic cathedral and second largest Catholic cathedral in the world: the Duomo di Milano. We know the Duomo occupied a central place in this ancient city because the street plan has its streets either radiating from the Duomo or circling it. In the afternoon we drive east to the town of Bergamo for a welcome dinner and overnight.

Day 3: Sotto il Monte Giovanni XXIII
I am going to sleep now, the Church is Yours. (John XXIII bedtime prayer)

After the morning’s celebration of Mass, we make our way to the small country village of Sotto il Monte, in the beautiful Province of Bergamo in the Lombardy region of Italy. It was here that one of the most beloved Popes and the spiritual and intellectual leader of the Second Vatican Council, was born on November 25, 1881, into a humble family of sharecroppers. Angelo Roncalli (St. John XXIII) was a firstborn son and the fourth child in a family of thirteen. On his deathbed he said, “I had the great grace to be born into a Christian family, modest and poor, but with the fear of the Lord.” Today we’ll enjoy following in his first footsteps, to see St. Mary’s Church where he was baptized as well as other sites where it all began. As we contemplate the early life of St. John XXIII, a man who set in motion ideas and forces that not only influenced the Church but the whole world, we will be reminded that out of humble beginnings the Spirit can accomplish great things. We’ll enjoy dinner and an overnight stay in Bergamo, the province’s capital city.

Day 4: Patriarch of Venice
The Church acts as if it has learned nothing from history, which is none the less, the great teacher of life. (St. John XXIII)

With its unique heritage of art, architecture, spirit, and culture, the city of Venice has earned the nickname La Serenissima, “The Most Serene” which seems fitting as we continue in the footsteps of St. John XXIII whose guiding motto was Obedientia et Pax.
St John XXIII became Patriarch of Venice in 1953 and was raised to the rank of cardinal by Pope Pius XII. As a sign of his esteem, President Vincent Auriol of France claimed the ancient privilege possessed by French monarchs and bestowed the red hat on the now-Cardinal Roncalli at a ceremony in the Elysee Palace. Today, we visit the magnificent Basilica of St. Mark (architecturally, a Byzantine wonder covered in golden mosaics and art treasures) where in his first homily, he exhibited the warmth, simplicity and charm that would become his trademark, when he told the Venetians, “I want to be your lovely brother.” This humility is in keeping with St. John XXIII’s preferred designation as servus servorum Dei – a servant of the servants of God. And instead of using a private gondola as befitting Patriarchs of the past, this Patriarch used a public boat to move about. We’ll do likewise as we make our way to the Piazza San Marco (St. Mark's Square) to see such splendid sights as the Doge's Palace, home to the political leader of the Republic of Venice. During our visit to this spiritual island, we can’t help remember another Patriarch of Venice: Pope John Paul I, who collaborated with St. John XXIII during the Second Vatican Council where suddenly and powerfully, the world was given to understand that Christ is King of the universe and the universe is right before our eyes. Toward the close of an unforgettable day, we’ll return to Bergamo for dinner and another overnight stay.

Day 5: A Pilgrimage to Loreto & Assisi

Today in many parts of the world, under the inspiring grace of the Holy Spirit, multiple efforts are being expended through prayer, word, and action to attain that fullness of unity which Jesus Christ desires. (Decree on Ecumenism #4)

It is said that St. John XXIII was often astonished by the attention of the Roman, Italian and International press (he often said of his travels: “You could not come to me, so I came to you.”). His pilgrimage by train to Loreto and Assisi a week before the October 11, 1962, start of the Second Ecumenical Council was no exception. The press paid special attention to this exceptional journey (it was the first time that a Pope went out of the Lazio region since the annexation of Rome by the Italian State in 1870) and noted with great care his speeches along the way while throngs of people welcomed him throughout the countryside as he often spoke to them from the windows of the train. He came to the sanctuaries of Loreto and Assisi for the same reason that other pilgrims from other times have come: to beseech God to bestow his extraordinary graces on him, and to bless his efforts, as he often said “to open the windows of the Church to let in some fresh air.” In Loreto, we’ll visit the Santa Casa di Loreto, the Holy House of Loreto, which has been a place of pilgrimage since at least the 14th century. Legend tells us that in 1291 the Virgin Mary’s House was miraculously transported by angels from Nazareth to Croatia, and then to Loreto in 1294. The Holy House is now located inside the Basilica. Here we celebrate Mass before continuing to Assisi for dinner and an overnight stay.

Day 6: Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace (attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi).

Assisi lies in the Umbria region of Italy on the eastern flank of Monte Subasio and is regarded as a very special spot on earth linked in legend with its native son, St. Francis, a gentle saint who founded the Franciscan order and is remembered as a great lover of nature (his sermon to an audience of birds is one of the best-loved sermons of his life). While in Assisi, we will explore the huge 13th-century basilica which contains many of the possessions of St. Francis and a series of frescoes depicting his life. You will have a chance to see where St. Francis knelt before the crucifix and heard Jesus ask him to rebuild His church. We will also visit Santa Maria Maggiore, the earliest extant church in Assisi and its former cathedral, as well as the Basilica of Santa Chiara (St. Clare), where St. Clare who founded the Order of Poor Clares, followed in the humble ways of St. Francis. We end our
tour of Assisi by visiting the tombs of St. Francis and St. Clare and will have the
opportunity to enjoy some leisure time this afternoon.

Day 7: St. Rita

Please let me suffer like you, Divine Saviour (St. Rita while living at the convent).

Our first destination today, Cascia, is a town in the Italian province of Perugia, a rather
remote and mountainous area in the southeastern corner of Umbria. It is here that we
celebrate mass and visit the Shrine of St. Rita. St. Rita, a wife and mother and later a nun
who while praying was wounded in the forehead by a thorn from the figure of the
crucifixion of Jesus Christ when it fell from the crown of thorns, was canonized in 1900.
The house where she was born can still be visited. We will also see the Basilica of St. Rita
which contains her incorrupt body, several relics from her life, and a Eucharistic miracle
from before her time. In the afternoon we continue to Rome.

Day 8: (Wednesday) Papal Audience, Vatican Museums & St. Peter’s Basilica

In this assembly, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we wish to inquire how we ought to
renew ourselves, so that we may be found increasingly faithful to the Gospel of Jesus
Christ. (Opening Message to Humanity #2, Second Vatican Council)

We greet the new day in a city nicknamed Caput Mundi (Capital of the World) and The
Eternal City, not only because Rome has always been the hub of art, education, high
culture and politics in the western world, but because it is also a spiritual capital and a
powerful center of pilgrimage. It was here on October 11, 1962, that St. John XXIII
(described in Time Magazine’s “Man of the Year” edition, as “not only a person of
luminous human qualities but an intuitive judge of mankind’s hopes and needs”) summoned Vatican II, one of only 21 councils convened in the more than 2,000 years of
Christian history. As we continue in his footsteps, we will first visit Vatican City to attend
an Audience/Blessing with our Holy Father (schedule permitting), then we will tour the
Vatican Museum which houses what can be described as the most important collection of
art in the world. The history and awe surrounding the galleries and all the treasures they
contain will truly transfix us. Highlights include The Tapestry Gallery, The Raphael
Rooms, and The Sistine Chapel where we will gaze on Michelangelo’s incredible
masterpiece. We will also enter St. Peter’s Basilica which has the largest interior of any
Christian church in the world and which has been described as the reason Rome is still the
center of the civilized world. Tradition and historical evidence hold that St. Peter’s tomb is
directly below the altar of this basilica, which American Ralph Waldo Emerson described
as an ornament of the earth… the sublime of the beautiful. We will also marvel at Bernini’s
beautiful bronze canopy over this altar. After being declared Blessed in 2000, St. John
XXIII’s body was transferred from the Grottoes of St. Peter’s Basilica to the St. Jerome
Altar in the basilica itself. The area that had held the sarcophagus of St. John XXIII,
located less than 100 ft from the Tomb of St. Peter, became the original tomb of St. John
Paul II, whose funeral was held on April 8, 2005. Over the last six years, roughly 20,000
pilgrims visited his tomb every day. In his will, St. John Paul II specifically wrote that he
wanted to be buried on that site. His wish was to be laid to rest on soil with a simple white
marble slab. With his beatification his remains were transferred from the crypt to the
basilica, as is tradition with popes, saints and the blessed. St. John Paul II’s remains were
taken to the San Sebastiano chapel, next to The Pietá, Michelangelo’s statue of the Blessed
Mother holding her crucified son, where the remains of another beatified pope, Inocencio
XI, rested until they were transferred to another part of the Basilica. The remains of St.
John Paul II are under this altar, covered with a gravestone and just four words: “Beatus
Ioannes Paulus II.” Before dinner, will we have the opportunity for individual exploration.
Some might want to sit quietly at an outside café to take it all in while others will want to
shop and savor the flavor of the “Eternal City.”
Day 9: The Major Basilicas
Thus it is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ, of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity. (Lumen Gentium #40)

In keeping with a simple, sincere piety and the spiritual notes kept all his life in a sort of diary called Journal of a Soul, St. John XXIII said to a group of cardinals a short time before his death, “Our humble life, like the life of everyone, is in the hands of God.” Today we begin with Mass at the Basilica of St. Mary Major. The ceiling of this basilica is said to be decorated with gold that Columbus brought back from the new world. Santa Maria Maggiore, the largest church in Rome dedicated to the Blessed Mother, is part of the day’s “Christian Rome” tour, and has beautiful Biblical mosaics, a marble floor, bell tower and one of the oldest shrines (containing a relic from the manger of the infant Jesus) dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. We will also visit the Basilica of St. John Lateran which is the oldest of the major basilicas and ranks first as the actual “parish church” of the Pope (Bishop of Rome). There we will learn about the Scala Sancta (Holy Stairs). Tradition has it that these steps, said to be the staircase leading once to the praetorium of Pilate at Jerusalem, are sanctified by the footsteps of Jesus Christ during his Passion. Next, we’ll see the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls which was founded by the Roman Emperor Constantine I over the burial place of Saint Paul. Enjoy a sumptuous farewell dinner with your brothers and sisters in the ecumenical spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

Day 10: Depart for Home
Our prayer is that in the midst of this world, there may radiate the light of our great hope in Jesus Christ, our only Savior. (Opening Message to Humanity, Second Vatican Council)

We will let the power of the holy places and priceless relics settle over us; then like other pilgrims of other times, go back to our lives with renewed faith and readiness.

We leave our hotel and head for the airport to return to the US.