

## **POPE ST. PIUS X (1835-1914)**

*By Father John Horgan*

**Our Parish and our School are dedicated to Pope Saint Pius X, who died a little over a hundred years ago. He is considered one of the most beloved Popes in modern times, and a man particularly devoted to children and their place in the Church. He was also the first Pope in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to come from a working poor family and to rise up to every level of priestly service – from curate to pastor, from canon to bishop, and finally from cardinal to Pope. He was simple, good-hearted and approachable. Many of the endearing qualities that people note in Pope Francis or St. John Paul II were first identified in Pius X.**

St. Pius X was born Giuseppe (Joseph) Melchiorre Sarto on June 2, 1835 in the little Italian town of Riese, in the province of Treviso near Venice. His father, Giovanni Sarto, was a cobbler by trade, and also caretaker of the city hall and the town's postmaster; his mother Margherita Sanson was a seamstress. The family had few worldly goods and the early life of young Giuseppe, eldest of eight surviving children, was a difficult one. He attended the parish school and afterwards, the parish priest arranged a scholarship for him at the high school in Castelfranco, a larger town two miles from Riese. In order to save his parents money, Giuseppe would carry his shoes tied over his shoulder and walk barefoot back and forth to school each day.

After completing the course of instruction at Castelfranco, he revealed that he had felt the call to the priesthood for some time, but had considered it impossible given his family's poverty. However, his parents blessed his vocation, and the pastor again came to the rescue by arranging another scholarship to the seminary at Padua. In November of 1850, young Sarto arrived at Padua, the city of Saint Anthony, and began his studies. It soon became clear that Beppe (Joey) had a fine mind and many talents. He worked hard and finally on September 18, 1858, Father Sarto was ordained at the cathedral in Castelfranco.

The young priest's first assignment was as curate at Tombolo, a village of about 1500 people. They were poor working families like his own. It was easy to love them and understand them. He organized a night school for adults, so that they could learn to read and write and not be cheated of their hard work on the farms. Father Sarto loved music and trained the parish choir too. His pastor at Tombolo, Father Constantini, wrote a prophetic summary of his assistant. "They have sent me as curate a young priest, with orders to mould him to the duties of pastor; in fact, however, the contrary is true. He is so zealous, so full of good sense, and other precious gifts that it is I who can learn much from him. Some day or other he will wear the mitre of a bishop, of that I am sure. After that—who knows?"

In July of 1867, Father Sarto, then 32 years of age, was appointed pastor of Salzano, a large and important parish in the diocese. There were many wealthy people in the area but even more who were poor or just getting by; all soon learned that the priest had a very tender heart. Father Joseph's two sisters, who acted as his housekeepers, were often at wit's end as their brother gave away much of his own clothing and food to the needy. He also loved to teach catechism and help people to really understand their faith.

After nine years at Salzano, Father Sarto was rewarded for his labors by the appointment as Canon of the Cathedral at Treviso and as Chancellor of that diocese. In addition, he became Spiritual Director of the seminary. Canon Sarto took a deep interest in this work of forming Christ in the hearts of young priests. However, in spite of these many duties, he remained ever the teacher; he often journeyed from the seminary into the city to teach catechism to the children, and he organized Sunday classes for those children who attended public schools, where religion was banned. When the diocese of Mantua fell vacant in 1884, Pope Leo XIII named Canon Sarto as bishop of that diocese.

Bishop Sarto found a troubled diocese in which to begin his work. There was a general opposition of the government to religion manifested in many ways—monasteries had been suppressed, many religious institutions were government-managed, and Church property was heavily taxed. All these political disturbances had a far-reaching effect on both the clergy and the laity. The seminaries of Mantua were empty and the younger priests discouraged; older priests had become lax and depressed. All were in need of a real "Servant-Leader," someone very much like Jesus whom the people could see, trust, and believe in. With his usual energy and spiritual strength, Bishop Sarto set to work to put his see in order. He gave first attention to the seminary, where by his own example of zeal and teaching, he won back the clergy to full and faithful service. He made sure that the people learned and understood their catechism; Bishop Sarto often taught such classes himself, and the people began to appreciate their Faith again. God blessed this work on behalf of all classes of society, and in 1893, His Holiness, Leo XIII, elevated Bishop Sarto to Cardinal and appointed him Patriarch of Venice.

As Patriarch of Venice, it was Tombolo, Salzano, and Mantua all over again, but on a wider scale—the same care for his clergy and for the seminaries, the ever-willing hand and heart given to the poor, the long hours spent in teaching young and old—only the red of his new office had replaced the purple and black of former days. Social and economic problems were of prime concern to the new cardinal, and any worthy social action organization was assured of his help. He supported workers' rights, unions and trade societies. When the Workingmen's Society was founded in Venice, the name of Cardinal Sarto was at the top of the list and he paid regular dues as a member!

On July 20, 1903, the reign of Leo XIII came to a close, and the world mourned the death of a great Pontiff. Cardinals from all over the world came to Rome for the conclave which would elect the new Pope, and it is again typical of Cardinal Sarto that, due to his many

charities, he was at first short of funds necessary to make the trip. When the voting began, and with each successive ballot, Cardinal Sarto gained more votes. He strongly pleaded that he was neither worthy nor capable enough for the office. When it was finally announced that he had gained sufficient votes to be elected, he bent his head, broke into tears, and whispered, "*Fiat voluntas tua*" (Thy will be done). He accepted, took the name of Pius X, and on August 9, 1903, was crowned as Vicar of Christ on earth.

The world was now the parish of the new Pontiff, and in his first encyclical he announced the aim of his reign. It was his desire, in the words of St. Paul, "to restore all things in Christ." (Eph 1:10). Once again, he began to encourage and re-form his priests, encouraged catechism, and every form of Catholic education. Every Sunday, he preached to the people in one of the Vatican courtyards – the first time this had ever been done. However, no reform of Pius' was more important than the Decrees on Holy Communion, and Pius X is often called "the Pope of the Eucharist." These decrees, issued from 1905 through 1910, allowed the reception of first Holy Communion at an earlier age than had formerly been required, encouraged the frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist by all Catholics, and relaxed the fast for the sick. Pope Pius decreed that all little children could receive Jesus in Holy Communion as soon as they could learn that the Host is Jesus and not ordinary bread. Before this, children did not receive their first Holy Communion until they were 12 or even 14. Pope Pius would even give Communion to little ones as young as 4! For this reason, he was called "The Pope of Children."

There were many other things that St. Pius initiated or accomplished as Pope, but we do not have the space to consider them here. In everything he did, he tried to be always a good Shepherd and loving teacher. Pius X labored for Our Lord until the very last days of his life. When he was 79, the First World War broke out. The Pope was heart-broken because he had seen the signs of war long before and tried to prevent it. A little more than a month after the outbreak of the war, the Pope was seized with an attack of influenza, and his weakened constitution could not combat the illness. Pius died peacefully on August 20, 1914, and the world paused to mourn the gentle and humble man whose last will and testament gave such an insight into his character. It read, in part, "I was born poor, I lived poor, I die poor."

Shortly after his death, the faithful began to make pilgrimages to his tomb, bringing flowers, prayers, and petitions for his help from Heaven. Accounts of miraculous favors and cures were announced and given widespread acclaim. On June 3, 1951, Pius X was declared Blessed, and finally on May 29, 1954, amid the traditional pealing of the bells in the great churches of Rome, Giuseppe Sarto, the humble parish priest of the world, was canonized a Saint of God. He was the first Pope to be named a saint in almost 400 years. We are very proud that he is our Patron Saint and such a wonderful role model for our parish and school community.

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