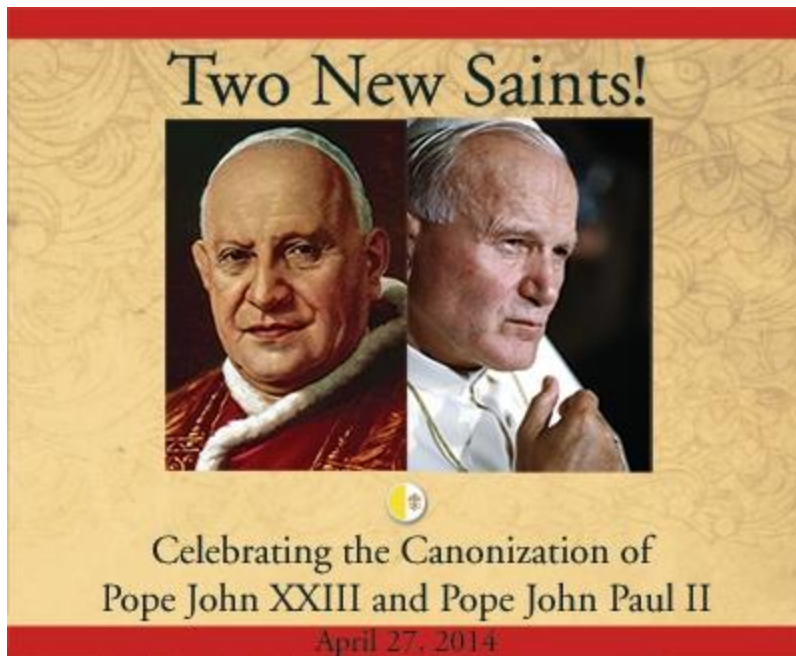


Pulling Down Walls

New saints John XXIII and John Paul II show us how it's done.



Nine-year-old Jerzy Kluger could hardly contain his excitement: he and his best friend, Lolek, had been admitted to the same middle school. Bursting to share the news, he raced to Lolek's house, then to nearby St. Mary's Church, where his friend was serving Mass. The liturgy was still in progress, so Jerzy slipped into a back pew. He wondered why two women nearby kept whispering and staring at him.

Finally, during Communion, one of them turned to ask, "Aren't you Kluger's son?" The boy said yes.

"What are you doing here?" she exclaimed. "You are a Jew, and Jews aren't allowed in church!"

Jerzy shrank into the dark pew. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

From the altar, Lolek could see that something was wrong. "What happened?" he asked after Mass was over. Jerzy explained, then

launched into an apology: “Believe me, Lolek, I didn’t know Jews aren’t allowed in here.”

“What are you talking about?” Lolek burst out. He was angry—but not at Jerzy. “Doesn’t she know that Jews and Catholics are all children of the same God?” The woman, now standing at the church door, heard him loud and clear. She looked at the boys, made the Sign of the Cross, and left.

“You can come here whenever you want,” Lolek assured his friend.

Beyond Boundaries. On April 27, Lolek—better known to the world as Karol Wojtyla, Pope John Paul II—will take his place among the canonized saints of the Catholic Church. He will share the honor with Angelo Roncalli, Pope John XXIII. Different from one another in many ways, the two popes had this in common: they didn’t let social boundaries keep them from relating in love to the people they encountered.

Even after he was elected pope, Karol Wojtyla kept in close touch with Jerzy Kluger, often consulting him on Catholic-Jewish relations. When he made his historic visit to Israel in 2000, Jerzy was at his side. Also present was another person with a story about how Karol had reached across social boundaries.

Out of the Crowd. It happened in January 1945, two days after Edith Zierer emerged from a Nazi labor camp in Czestochowa, Poland. Sick and hungry, the thirteen-year-old Jewish girl had staggered through snow and bitter cold before collapsing in a corner of a village train station. Unaware that her parents and sister had died in the Holocaust, she had been trying to get home to them in Krakow. Now, too weak to move, she was waiting for death. People came and went around Edith. Maybe they felt too busy to get involved—or fearful, or even reluctant to reach out to a Jew. Though some Poles had risked their lives to save their Jewish neighbors,

others harbored anti-Semitic views and had cooperated with the Nazis.

The young seminarian who finally noticed Edith was different. It wasn't just that he wore a black cassock; it was his kindness. He brought her a cup of tea—her first in three years—and a hearty sandwich. He offered to accompany her to Krakow. And when he discovered she was too feeble to walk, he carried her on his back to catch a train several miles away. Only after they had reached their destination did she ask his name: “Karol Wojtyla.”

For years, that was all Edith knew about her rescuer. Then one morning in 1978, in her home in Haifa, Israel, she opened a newspaper and burst into tears at the lead story: Karol Wojtyla had been elected pope.

“I want to thank you,” she wrote John Paul, identifying herself as the girl he had saved. And so they met again: once in Rome and again at Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial. There, barely able to speak through tears, Edith Zierer recited a line from the Torah: “One who saves a life, it is as if he saves the whole world.”

Not a Lofty CEO. Becoming pope didn't lessen Karol's alertness to the needs of people around him, whatever their position. Andreas Widmer experienced this on Christmas Eve 1986, when he was a newbie Swiss Guard assigned to guard the papal apartments. Lonely and homesick, Widmer was in a miserable state as the pope passed by on his way to Midnight Mass.

Taking in the guard's dismal look and red eyes, John Paul stopped and said, “You're new! What's your name?” And then, “This is your first Christmas away from home, isn't it?” Andreas managed a yes. The pope gave him a penetrating look, clasped his hand, and said, “Andreas, I want to thank you for the sacrifice you are making for the Church. I will pray for you during Mass this evening.”

“That was all I needed,” said Widmer. “Someone had noticed my pain, someone had cared, and that someone was the pope himself.”

Comfort wasn't the only outcome of that exchange, which was the first of many. One day, John Paul gave the guard a rosary and advised him to pray it often. Not especially fervent at the time, Widmer had to ask someone for instructions. But as he prayed the beads, he had a life-changing “conversion moment,” he said, “an experience of the presence of God.”

Away with the Pedestal! It's easy to forget that popes didn't always cross social boundaries so easily. Customs and traditions once kept them isolated in the Vatican, and their interactions and audiences were very formal. It was Angelo Roncalli who broke the mold. From his first appearance on the papal balcony on October 28, 1958—his portly figure encased in a too-tight cassock—John XXIII radiated genial approachability.

Rejecting the image of a pope on a pedestal, he swiftly abolished many of the honorifics that came with the role. No more genuflecting before the pope, John insisted; no more references to messages issued from “his august lips.” He told Vatican workers not to scurry off whenever he appeared, as they had been instructed to do; he wanted to meet each one.

Old ways die hard, though. And so, strolling through the Vatican Gardens one afternoon, John had to coax the gardeners out from behind the bushes where they were hiding. Then he got them talking—about their families, their children, and, finally, their wages. No pay raises had been issued in many years, and John was shocked at how little they made. “What?” he exclaimed. “No family with children can live on that. What has become of justice? Just wait: that's going to change!”

And so it did. “The big news of the week in Vatican City was a raise,” TIME magazine announced in its July 20, 1959, issue. It was an across-the-board increase in all wages and salaries, with an especially generous hike in family allowances.

“We cannot always require others to observe the Church’s teaching on social justice if we do not apply it in our own domain,” John told his administrators. “The Church must take the lead in social justice by good example.” And to a cardinal who came complaining that a certain lay worker now earned as much as he did, John remarked: “That usher has ten children. I hope the cardinal doesn’t.”

Reaching behind the Iron Curtain. Whenever Angelo Roncalli saw a wall between people, he worked to bring it down. “I try to pull out a brick here and there,” he modestly admitted. Though he was referring to the divisions between Christians, this was his general approach to any barrier that turned groups or individuals into hostile factions.

John’s desire for unity inspired his surprising proposal of an ecumenical council. Less well known is how that same desire affected the international political scene at the end of his papacy, as the Cold War waxed hot.

It was a time of high anxiety, with the Russian-controlled Communist bloc and the Western countries facing off. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev had made his famous threat—“We will bury you!”—to Western diplomats and was belligerently pounding his desk at United Nations meetings. The world was tense with fear over the looming threat of nuclear war.

It was surprising, then, when Khrushchev sent John XXIII a good-wish telegram for the pope’s eightieth birthday in 1961. Was it a trick? An attempt to manipulate the pope for political gain? Concerned Vatican officials advised John to ignore the message. He

listened, but he sensed an opening for the Holy Spirit. So he sat down and answered Khrushchev anyway. He expressed his thanks and cordial wishes for universal peace through “understanding based on human brotherhood,” and assured the Soviet leader of his prayers.

Critics pronounced John naïve. Some even suspected him of being a Communist sympathizer. But his friendly gesture made all the difference a year later, when Soviet missiles were detected in Cuba, poised to strike the U.S. With Russian ships en route to Havana, President John F. Kennedy announced a blockade to stop them. Suddenly, the prospect of nuclear war seemed all too real.

Through secret channels, Pope John was asked to intervene. Praying throughout, he issued carefully worded appeals for peace—one of them sent directly to Moscow. This gave Khrushchev a face-saving out, and he had it placed on Page 1 of the official party newspaper under the headline: “We beg all rulers not to be deaf to the cry of humanity.” Now able to claim the high moral ground and present himself as a lover of peace, the Russian leader backed down.

And so, with Pope John playing a key role, the crisis was resolved. Humanity was spared a catastrophe that—according to U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara—would have killed two and a half million people in its opening salvo alone.

To All the World. “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature,” the risen Jesus told his disciples (Mark 16:15). That’s what he tells us, too. Show everyone my love, bring them my life, and help them into my kingdom.

Let’s ask the Lord to fill us with the love, insight, and courage we need to do that. Let’s look for ways to reach people we may have ignored or have seen as far outside our comfort zones. And as we do, we can look to our two newest saints for help and inspiration.

Material for this article was drawn mainly from: Jerzy Kluger's The Pope and I; Andreas Widmer's The Pope and the CEO; Roger Cohen's International Herald Tribunestory on Edith Zierer (April 6, 2005); and Peter Hebblethwaite's Pope John XXIII.