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"For freedom Christ set us free" (Galatians 5:1).

Commemoration of Saint John XXIII

[Gal 5:1-6](#); [Luke 11:37-41](#)

The readings in today's Lectionary selections especially fit the church's commemoration of Saint Pope John XXIII.

In St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, he opposed those in the early church who insisted that converts to Christianity, especially gentiles, observe the Mosaic Law, including circumcision. This legalism, Paul argued, negates the gift of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. In today's gospel from Luke, Jesus challenged the legalism of the Pharisees over ritual cleanliness while ignoring inner purity of the heart.

When Pope John convened Vatican II in 1959 as a pastoral council, he faced stiff opposition from traditionalists who demanded strict adherence to doctrine and rules as the most important sign of Catholic identity. Pope John insisted that the "medicine of mercy" and openness within the church and to the world were the keys to a much needed renewal of the church's mission.

Pope Francis has echoed the voice and spirit of Pope John in his emphasis on God's mercy as the heart of the gospel. He seeks a renewal of the pastoral church as a "field hospital" and has challenged his fellow bishops to give primacy to the care of people struggling to meet the legal ideals the church teaches. This openness is at the heart of the synodal church Francis is promoting as the fulfillment of Vatican II.

Some in the hierarchy have publicly opposed Francis as being too lenient with sinners, while the pope has said that he himself is a sinner in need of the gift of mercy. We are all sinners, and no one has ever earned salvation by keeping the rules. It is God's gift given to anyone who trusts God and opens his heart in faith.

St. Paul rejoiced in the freedom Christ has won for us all by his death and resurrection. It is a freedom that frees us from obsessive fear over our failures or the need to judge others. But it also places us under the "law" of love, which challenges us far more than any set of rules. With the help of God's grace, we walk in love, from the heart filling everything we say and do. This was Saint Pope John's vision for the church, and we rejoice today to celebrate his life and influence.

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