



## Introduction: A Pope Who Never Was

Imagine for a moment someone mentions “Pope John XX.” You might instinctively think of Saint John XXIII. But no—this isn’t about Angelo Roncalli. We’re talking about a Pope who—in **theory—existed between the 13th and 15th centuries... yet never actually occupied the Chair of Peter.**

This article isn’t a Dan Brown novel or a conspiracy theory. We’re referring to a **real phenomenon in the history of the Church**: the inclusion, for centuries, of a **“Pope John XX” who never existed**, and how his phantom figure speaks to us profoundly today—in these times of doctrinal confusion, crisis of authority, and an urgent need for spiritual discernment.

The story of John XX not only reveals human error in a divine institution—it also shows how **Truth finds its way even in the midst of shadows**, and how every Christian is called to live with open eyes, a firm heart, and faith anchored not in rumors, but in Christ.

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## I. The History of a Phantom Pope: Where Did John XX Come From?

### 1. The Context of the Great Western Schism

The story of John XX becomes entangled in one of the most complex periods of the Church: **the Great Western Schism** (1378–1417), when **multiple Popes and antipopes** vied for authority in the Church—some in Rome, others in Avignon. It was a time of deep division, when **the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ was deeply wounded.**

During this period, **the papal chronology became confused.** The chaos of names, titles, antipopes, and legitimate successors of Peter led **some chroniclers to erroneously believe that a “John XX” had existed** in the papal succession.

### 2. An Error Perpetuated for Centuries

When **Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was elected Pope in 1958**, choosing the name “John XXIII,” he surprised the world. Why not call himself “John XXIV,” since a “John XX” already appeared in papal lists?



The answer was clear: **there never was such a Pope. John XX never existed.**

Roncalli publicly acknowledged that, after consulting with historians and theologians, it was confirmed that **the inclusion of Pope John XX in the papal lists was a historical error**, born of confusion and perpetuated for centuries.

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## II. Theological Lessons from “The Pope Who Wasn’t”

### 1. The Church is Both Human and Divine

This episode reminds us that **the Church is not only divine, but also human**. In her visible structure, errors, confusion, and flaws can arise. But despite that, **the guidance of the Holy Spirit never abandons the Church**.

“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth.” (John 16:13)

Though we as humans err, **the Church as the institution founded by Christ remains faithful**. Even an error as unusual as a Pope who never existed was ultimately corrected, showing that Truth always prevails.

### 2. The Value of Discernment

We live in an age of fake news, noisy social networks, “prophets” popping up everywhere, and even theories about hidden or heretical Popes. In this context, the figure of John XX becomes a **symbol of the urgent need for discernment and truth**.

The historical confusion surrounding his existence pushes us to **not believe something just because “it looks official” or “I saw it online.”** Faith must be nurtured by truth, not by superstition.

### 3. Humility in the Face of Error

The case of John XX also teaches us that **acknowledging mistakes does not weaken the**



**Church—it purifies her.** When John XXIII chose to ignore the “phantom” and took the name knowingly, it was an act of historical and theological cleansing.

Likewise, we must learn to **accept our own mistakes, confess them, and correct them.** Only in this way can we grow in truth.

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### III. A Spiritual Guide: Living in Truth in Times of Confusion

**What can this seemingly anecdotal episode teach us for our daily spiritual lives? Much more than it appears.**

#### 1. *Seek the Truth, Even When It Hurts*

The story of Pope John XX challenges us to **not settle for comfortable or incorrect versions of reality**, even within the Church. We must study, form ourselves, ask questions, go deeper.

**Read the Catechism, study the documents of the Magisterium, consult reliable sources.** Do not leave your faith in the hands of rumors or social media opinions.

□ *Daily practice:* Spend 10 minutes each day studying an authentic magisterial text or solid spiritual reading. Let your faith be grounded, not improvised.

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#### 2. *Discern What You Hear*

If an error like John XX could slip into official records for centuries, **how much more easily can error creep into our conversations, homilies, and catechesis today?** The devil is the father of lies and uses half-truths to entangle minds.

□ Saint Paul warned:

*“For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine, but, having itching ears, they will accumulate for*



| *themselves teachers to suit their own desires.” (2 Timothy 4:3)*

□ *Daily practice:* When you hear something that raises doubts (a news item, a doctrine, an interpretation), **don’t automatically take it as truth**. Ask: Does the Church teach this? Is it part of the Magisterium? Did Christ or the Apostles really say this?

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### 3. *Correct with Charity*

The correction of the John XX error was neither scandalous nor violent. It was serene, humble, and clear. We must act the same way.

**If you see someone believing or spreading errors of faith, help them with charity, not arrogance.** Not to humiliate, but to guide. Not to argue, but to heal.

□ *Daily practice:* Look around you—are there confused or misinformed brothers and sisters? Can you recommend a good book, a lecture, a Bible verse? Do it. Truth is charity when offered with tenderness.

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## IV. Present-Day Applications: The “John XX” of Our Time

Today, we may not face a phantom Pope, but we do face **phantom doctrines, hollow spiritualities, soulless liturgies, and cross-less preachers**.

The case of John XX is a mirror of what can happen **when we allow sentimentalism or confusion to replace Truth**.

- Today’s “John XX” might be that irreverent Mass that seems valid but is spiritually empty.
- It might be that modern catechesis that never mentions sin or hell.
- It might be that Instagram-style spirituality preaching a God without demands, a faith without sacrifice, a Church without the Cross.

**But Christ did not found the Church to entertain—He founded it to save.** And only those who love the truth, even when it hurts, will find eternal life.



## Conclusion: The Error That Enlightened Us

In a world where everything is questioned—even what is obvious—the story of John XX—the Pope who never existed—**becomes a parable for our times.**

It reminds us that:

- Truth doesn't depend on repetition, but on reality.
- The Church's authority is divine, but her history is marked by our human fragility.
- God corrects the errors of His people—not to humiliate them, but to heal them.

Above all, it teaches us that **every Christian has the duty to live with open eyes, an enlightened mind, and a firm heart**, knowing that only the Truth will set us free.

| *"Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*  
| *(John 8:32)*

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## Final Prayer

Lord Jesus,  
You who are the Incarnate Truth,  
deliver us from the lies of the world and the half-truths that obscure Your light.  
Give us a thirst for knowledge and discernment in these confusing times.  
May we never accept lies, even when they wear the mask of piety.  
And may we always seek Your face,  
even when it costs us the comfort of error.  
Amen.