

The Popes have always been a major and majestic part of our identity; let's face it, when you hear "Catholic," the things you think of are rosary, crucifix, host, and pope. Since the Church was founded, from the very beginning on Pentecost, Peter took the lead. Jesus gave Peter and his successors a precious, extremely challenging mission in John 21: "Feed My sheep." Throughout the centuries our popes have been good, bad, holy, notorious, strong, and weak. What sets them apart? What makes them so special, and finally, what makes a pope remembered? Let's answer this question with another question: What changes history? A love of the most perfect God, who loved us first. So what makes the Pope different? A relationship with God where you are holding and being held, loving and being loved, and giving and being given to. So my personal three favorite popes are just men who have striven to meet, know, and serve God with their whole hearts: St. John the twenty-third, St. John Paul the second, and St. Peter.

"Be not afraid! Open wide the doors for Christ... Christ knows 'what is in man.' He alone knows it." — Pope John Paul II in his Inaugural Address, St. Peter's Square, October 22, 1978

Everything about John Paul the Great, St. Pope John Paul the Second, or JP2, can be summed up in his inaugural quote: gentleness, sympathy, fear of God, and love. He is arguably the most influential pope in the last century. He made incredible contributions spiritually, politically, and pastorally to the world. He brought a simple faith and love of Christ to every encounter. He was the perfect example of love of God and love of country. My favorite example of this is when he told the communist that if they invaded his Polish homeland, he would personally come and put himself between the tanks and Poland. John Paul the Second was just a normal boy and then a pope. JPtwo was incredibly humble. Simply put, he allowed himself to be radically transformed by Christ, and this shaped his entire life.

St. Pope John the twenty-third is controversial for being the pope who called the controversial Vatican II, one of the largest meetings of the church in history. John, however, was not very concerned about what people thought but more about what God thought of him. He was an iconic example of joyfulness. His Holiness was known after his death as "John the Good," and for good reason. Pope John had such a great deal of mercy and kindness that he could not be passed over. John XXIII resumed the practice of the pope visiting the sick and poor. Pope John was also extremely funny and kind; he once stopped some Jewish people who were exiting their synagogue and blessed them. The people, after some bewilderment, understood and applauded the first pope in history to bless Jews. He was simply a man who followed Christ's instructions to "love one another."

My favorite pope of all time is Saint Peter. Saint Peter went from fisherman to disciple to apostle to church leader. After Pentecost Peter became absolutely on fire for Christ and could not stop sharing him. Though Peter was the first pope, he was human, so he made some mistakes. He left our Lord in the garden to suffer alone and would not stay by His side as He was being killed, and of course Peter's most popular mistake was when he denied our Lord three times at the house of the high priest. Jesus, however, equips the called, not calls the equipped. So after He rose, He asked Peter if he loved Him three times; Peter declared his love for Him three times. Peter would be the rock on which He founded His Church. Our savior Jesus Christ said that "there is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for his friends." Peter then had no greater love than Jesus.

Every pope we have contributed to the image of our church; every action would be scrutinized and intention misunderstood, yet so, so many of these men still faithfully served Christ's church, fulfilling His amazing command to "Feed His lambs." We, the lambs, should both pray and be extremely grateful for these men who sacrificed so much to give everything to Christ. St. Pope John the twenty-third, St. John Paul the second, and St. Peter gave everything; they lost their lives so that they could find them.