

ATTRACTED BY VIRTUE

Recently, MLB star Mike Sweeney presented Pope Leo XIV with a #267 Royals jersey to honor him as the 267th Pope. The Holy Spirit helped me navigate through these popes to find my three favorites, whose lives, virtues, and contributions to the Church and society inspire me: Pope St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and Venerable Pope Leo XIII.

I am inspired by the courage, patience, and love displayed by John Paul II and by his promotion of the universal call to holiness. Throughout John Paul II's life, he had the courage to deal with many hard things, including the death of his mother, brother, and father before he was 21 years old. He loved his family very much, and their passing brought him great sadness. In addition to the deaths of his family, he suffered as Nazi Germany invaded his beloved Poland. During the Nazi occupation, he studied for the priesthood in an underground seminary. When the Nazis finally left, the Soviets took over and controlled Poland until the middle of his papacy. John Paul II demonstrated patience and love in not becoming vengeful against his oppressors, even when he had the power to do so. Throughout his papacy he championed the universal call to holiness: the idea that everyone is called to be a saint, not just consecrated men and women. In that spirit, he canonized 455 and beatified 1,338 people from various walks of life. John Paul II's response to the hardships in his life strengthened him in courage, patience, and love, forming him into the great saint he is today.

Like John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI lived through the terrible events of World War II. I hope to imitate his dedication to the Church, perseverance, and humility. German-born Joseph Ratzinger and his family were dedicated to the Church's anti-Nazi teaching; when drafted, he deserted without firing a shot. He needed extraordinary perseverance to live under an anti-Christian government while remaining faithful to his Catholic beliefs. He continued his dedication to Church teaching while serving as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. In his own words, "We are really in this Congregation confronted with the most difficult aspects of the life of the Church today."¹ During his papacy, he humbly approached the heads of other Christian churches, persevering in his mission to bring them into unity with the

¹ Bunson, Matthew E., *We have a Pope!: Benedict XVI* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 2005), 155.

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Catholic Church. With great humility, Pope Benedict resigned as Pope in 2013. Benedict's life was filled with ups and downs, but he stayed true to the teachings of the church to become, as writer Charles Lewis claims, "one of the greatest men the Roman Catholic Church has ever produced."² The virtues of dedication, perseverance, and humility were the keys to his greatness.

One of my many faults is my temper, so I can learn much from the life of Leo XIII, whose calm demeanor, faithfulness, and desire for peace prompted him to promote unity in many areas. He was born Vincenzo Gioacchino Pecci in 1810. While serving as the Papal Legate and Nuncio on many diplomatic trips, Bishop Pecci saw the need to strengthen the relationship between Church and State. After being elected Pope he sent letters to many heads of state, wishing to improve understanding between the Vatican and other countries. Throughout his quarter of a century serving as Pope, he worked extremely hard to create peace between workers and employers. He dedicated an entire encyclical to this topic. He also worked to bring peace between different countries. He was not successful most of the time, so some might say he was a failure, but as Mother Teresa once said, "God has not called me to be successful, he has called me to be faithful." Faithful Pope Leo certainly was, and that is why he is now on his way to canonization. By imitating his virtues, perhaps I will be someday, too.

Researching these popes has filled me with greater passion for church and papal history and a desire to imitate their lives of holiness. I am encouraged by St. John Paul II's universal call to holiness to live out my own path to sainthood. The example of Pope Benedict helps me to stand firm on the rock that is the Church. When I am tempted to fight with my siblings, I will remember Pope Leo's peacefulness. I will "be not afraid" to live out my call to holiness, as John Paul II exhorted the young people of his time.

² Lewis, Charles, "Discovering the Unexpected Benedict XVI," *CatholicRegister.org*, Oct 31, 2024, <https://www.catholicregister.org/item/1299-discovering-the-unexpected-benedict-xvi>