



The history of the Catholic Church is a narrative of holiness, sacrifice, and evangelization, but also of human errors, sins, and dark moments. Christ promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against His Church (Matthew 16:18), and that prophecy has been fulfilled despite the flaws of some of its representatives. In this article, we will explore the lives of ten popes whose leadership was questionable, not with the intention of criticizing, but to learn how God continues to work even through human weakness.

1. Pope Stephen VI (896-897) – The Macabre “Cadaver Synod”

Stephen VI starred in one of the most chilling episodes in ecclesiastical history. He ordered the exhumation of his predecessor, Pope Formosus, to put him on trial. The “Cadaver Synod” ended with the condemnation of the deceased, whose remains were thrown into the Tiber River. This act caused a scandal in Rome and led to his imprisonment and subsequent assassination.

Reflection:

Revenge and hatred have no place in the Christian faith. Stephen VI represents the inability to forgive and the manipulation of power.

2. Pope John XII (955-964) – Corruption in the Papacy

John XII ascended to the papal throne at the age of 18 and turned the Vatican into a center of scandals. He was accused of sacrilege, murder, adultery, and even invoking demons. His reign ended abruptly when he was murdered by a jealous husband who found him with his wife.

Reflection:

Personal sin does not invalidate the Church’s authority, but it shows how necessary discernment and prayer are in choosing leaders.

3. Pope Benedict IX (1032-1048) – Selling the Papacy

Benedict IX was pope in three different periods due to political intrigues and bribes. In an unprecedented event, he sold the papacy to his godfather, Gregory VI. His life was marked by moral disorder and greed.



Reflection:

The papacy is not a position of prestige but of service. The example of Benedict IX invites us to seek the common good rather than personal power.

4. Pope Urban VI (1378-1389) – The Western Schism

Urban VI was elected in a tense environment, and his irascible character divided the Church, leading to the Western Schism, with multiple popes reigning simultaneously. He even ordered the torture of cardinals who were not loyal to him.

Reflection:

Unity in the Church is fundamental. Urban VI reminds us that leadership must be exercised with humility and wisdom.

5. Pope Alexander VI (1492-1503) – The Excesses of the Borgias

Rodrigo Borgia is one of the most infamous popes. His pontificate was marked by nepotism, corruption, and scandals. He promoted the opulence of his family and was accused of simony and moral depravity.

Reflection:

The example of Alexander VI shows us that the Church is not built on men but on Christ. Faith must be centered on God, not on His earthly representatives.

6. Pope Julius II (1503-1513) – The Warrior Pope

Julius II led armies, expanded the Papal States, and focused more on politics than spirituality. Although he commissioned the Sistine Chapel, his government was marked by wars and violence.

Reflection:

Temporal power should not overshadow the mission of evangelization. The Church should be



a sign of peace, not war.

7. Pope Leo X (1513-1521) – The Luxury That Sparked the Reformation

Leo X financed the reconstruction of St. Peter's Basilica by selling indulgences, which ignited Martin Luther's protest and led to the Protestant Reformation. His love for luxury weakened the Church's moral authority.

Reflection:

Attachment to material things can divert the Church's mission. Evangelical poverty is a testimony of authenticity.

8. Pope Clement VII (1523-1534) – The Loss of England

His indecision in the case of Henry VIII led to the Anglican Schism. His lack of leadership cost the Church the loss of England and dealt a blow to Christian unity.

Reflection:

The decisions of leaders have lasting consequences. Firmness in faith is crucial in times of crisis.

9. Pope Paul IV (1555-1559) – The Radical Inquisition

Paul IV intensified the Inquisition, censored books, and persecuted Jews and reformers. His harshness provoked discontent even among Catholics.

Reflection:

Faith must be proclaimed with charity. Rigor without mercy repels rather than attracts.

10. Pope John XXII (1316-1334) – A Doctrinal Error

John XXII temporarily denied the immediate beatific vision after death, which generated theological controversy. His teaching was later corrected by his successor.



Reflection:

Even popes can err in minor matters. Papal infallibility does not imply impeccability or omniscience.

Conclusion: Christ's Promise Prevails

History teaches us that the holiness of the Church does not depend on the perfection of its leaders but on God's grace. Despite these popes, faith has endured. The Church is not just its hierarchy but the Body of Christ, and we, as the faithful, must remain steadfast, pray for our pastors, and seek personal holiness.

May this reflection help us trust in God, strengthen our faith, and live with hope, remembering that the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church, even in its darkest moments.