



*A meditation on humility, obedience, and true Christian leadership*

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## Introduction: When the highest honor becomes the greatest fear

In the collective imagination, being elected Pope seems like the culmination of a life given entirely to God: the highest honor, the holiest burden. However, throughout the history of the Church, there have been holy men who, when proposed or even elected to occupy the Chair of Peter, recoiled in horror at the idea. Why would anyone flee from such dignity? What does this tell us about leadership, humility, and God's will?

In a world where power and visibility are coveted, these episodes are deeply countercultural. They teach us that true Christian leadership is not measured by titles but by the willingness to carry the cross. This article explores real cases of cardinals who refused to become Pope and how their example can enlighten us today.

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## I. Living History: Cardinals Who Fled from the Throne of Peter

### 1. **St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584)** – The reforming cardinal who feared the papacy

St. Charles Borromeo was a model cardinal of the Tridentine reform, Archbishop of Milan, promoter of the Roman Catechism, and tireless defender of clerical holiness. His life of prayer, penance, and service made him one of the most frequently mentioned names to succeed St. Pius V. Yet Borromeo sincerely feared being elected Pope. He begged that the Holy Spirit would take that cup away from him. He preferred to remain a humble servant of his diocese rather than become the visible head of the Church.

Why this fear? Because he knew the immense weight of the papacy, not as a human honor, but as a radical imitation of Christ the Shepherd. He did not crave power—he embraced the cross.

### 2. **St. Philip Neri (1515-1595)** – The “Apostle of Rome” who hid

Although not a cardinal, Philip Neri was proposed several times as a papal candidate. His reaction was literally to run and hide. Known for his joy and prophetic spirit, he understood that his mission was not to reign, but to console souls and preach conversion. “I prefer



Paradise,” he would reply whenever offered an ecclesiastical position.

### 3. **Cardinal Giuseppe Siri (1906-1989)** – The legend of the “uncrowned Pope”

Although sources vary and some historians deny his formal election, Cardinal Siri represents a symbol of those who could have taken the papacy but whose convictions or external pressures prevented it. Siri was Archbishop of Genoa and a key figure in the traditionalist movement of the 20th century. It is said that he was elected in more than one conclave but declined out of obedience or prudence. Whether true or not, he represents many pastors who viewed the papacy not as a promotion, but as a mission.

### 4. Cardinal Camillo Laurenti (1861-1938)

Cardinal Camillo Laurenti, a prominent Italian prelate and Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, was a key figure in the Roman Curia during the early decades of the 20th century. During the 1922 conclave, held after the death of Pope Benedict XV, Laurenti was considered one of the most serious *papabili*. According to historical accounts and indirect testimonies, when his candidacy began to gain traction among the cardinal electors, he is said to have humbly expressed his refusal to accept the papacy if elected, convinced that he lacked the strength needed to lead the Church in such turbulent times. This tacit renunciation is believed to have cleared the way for the election of Cardinal Achille Ratti, who was ultimately chosen as Pope Pius XI. Laurenti continued to serve the Church faithfully from within the Curia until his death, always demonstrating a spirit of obedience, humility, and deep sense of duty.

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## II. Theology of Rejection: Is It Lawful to Flee the Papacy?

At first glance, rejecting the papacy may seem like disobedience to God. Yet, in the Catholic tradition, there is room to discern one’s vocation—even at the highest level. The papacy is not a reward; it is a cross. It is to be the “servant of the servants of God” (*servus servorum Dei*). The Catechism reminds us:

“Whoever wants to be first among you must be your servant” (cf. Mt 20:27).



The key lies in **evangelical humility**: a theological virtue deeply lived by the saints. It is not false modesty, but a profound awareness of one's smallness before God. St. Bernard of Clairvaux said: *"He who is not humble cannot be elevated without falling."*

When a cardinal flees the papacy, he often does so not out of cowardice, but out of reverent fear of disappointing Christ, out of love for the Church, and a clear awareness of his own limitations.

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### III. Practical Teachings for Today: What Can the Average Christian Learn?

#### 1. **Do not seek power—seek mission**

The Christian life is not about climbing the ladder of recognition or hierarchy but about descending to the feet of others, as Jesus did when He washed the disciples' feet (cf. Jn 13:1-17). The example of these cardinals teaches us not to cling to prestige, but to serve from wherever we are.

*"Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 14:11).*

#### 2. **Discern your responsibilities with prayer and obedience**

Not every "opportunity" is a calling from God. Spiritual prudence requires discernment. Am I truly being called to this role, this decision, this leadership? Or am I fleeing from the cross or pursuing an ego disguised as apostolic zeal?

The saints who refused the papacy did so after deep prayer, spiritual direction, and a trusting surrender to Providence. We can learn from them to consult God before making significant decisions.

#### 3. **The cross is not optional**

Jesus did not say, "Whoever wants to be my disciple, let him follow me when it's convenient."



He said:

*“Whoever wants to come after me, must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Lk 9:23).*

Sometimes the cross comes in the form of a mission we did not seek (like being elected Pope). Other times, it means renouncing something we desire out of fidelity to God. What matters is not to flee from the cross but to embrace it with inner freedom.

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## IV. Theological-Pastoral Guide: How to Live This Teaching Today

### 1. Examination of conscience about power and ambition

- Am I pursuing roles or responsibilities for personal glory?
- Am I able to say “no” to responsibilities that are not part of my vocation?
- Do I value recognition more than truth?

### 2. Daily practice of humility

- Be grateful for your gifts, but recognize them as received from God.
- Accept correction without justifying yourself.
- Celebrate the achievements of others without comparison.

### 3. Spiritual accompaniment and obedience

- Speak with a spiritual director or trusted guide when facing serious decisions.
- Do not make major decisions alone or driven by emotion.
- Practice obedience to the Church, even when it is difficult.

### 4. Offer your life as a service

- Make the Virgin’s words your own: *“Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word”* (Lk 1:38).
- Embrace small daily missions as if they were the greatest: caring for your children, being fair at work, listening attentively to someone who suffers.



## Conclusion: The True Pope is Christ

The cardinals who fled the papacy understood that the true Supreme Pontiff is Jesus Christ. The Pope is not an absolute monarch, but a pastor who serves in Christ's place. And those who knew how to say "no" to that dignity teach us how to say "yes" to what truly matters: God's will.

Not all of us are called to be Popes, but all of us are called to be saints. And holiness is not measured in titles but in fidelity.

*"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father" (Mt 7:21).*

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## Final Prayer

**Lord Jesus, meek and humble Master,  
teach us to prefer Your will over our own ambitions.  
Give us free hearts, capable of saying "no" to power and "yes" to service.  
Like St. Charles Borromeo, who feared disappointing You more than not being  
elected,  
make us docile to Your Spirit.  
May our decisions always be incarnate prayer,  
and if You call us to bear a cross,  
let us carry it with You, and not alone.  
Amen.**