

Shepherding in Tragic Times: A Reflective Study on Catholic Leadership

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Abstract

In moments of deep tragedy, ranging from war, persecution, pandemics, and social unrest, the Catholic Church has turned to its shepherds for prophetic vision, spiritual strength, and moral clarity. This study offers a reflective analysis of Catholic leadership through key historical episodes, examining how selected Popes responded to crisis with pastoral wisdom, theological conviction, and institutional resilience. Drawing on case studies including Pope Gregory the Great's response to the plague in the sixth century, Pope Pius XII's wartime diplomacy during the Holocaust, Pope John Paul II's moral resistance to Communism, Pope John XXIII's promotion of peace and dialogue during the Cold War, and Pope Francis's guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic, the article explores how ecclesial leaders embody the role of the Good Shepherd in tragic times. Their legacy reveals a Church that suffers, adapts, and ultimately endures through fidelity to Christ's mission. By integrating historical events with theological insight, this article contributes to the discourse on Church leadership in times of adversity and offers pastoral strategies for today's ecclesial challenges.

Keywords: Crisis Management, Papal diplomacy, Synodality and Reform, Ecclesial resilience

Introduction

In every era of the Roman Catholic Church, the journey has been called to lead not only in times of spiritual vitality but also amid war, persecution, and moral crisis. Catholic leaders have had to guide the faithful through periods of profound suffering, balancing fidelity to the

Gospel with careful engagement in complex socio-political realities. This study reflects on the leadership of pivotal figures. Pope Gregory the Great, Pope Pius XII, Pope John Paul II, Pope John XXIII, and Pope Francis exemplified courage, diplomacy, and spiritual resilience in times of tragedy. By analysing their coping strategies and pastoral responses, this paper seeks to uncover the essential qualities of effective Catholic leadership during historical crises and consider how the Church continues to serve as a moral compass in a fractured world.

1. Pope Gregory the Great (590–604): A Shepherd Among Ruins

The year was 590. Rome stood not as the proud imperial capital it once was, but as a haunted city of ghosts and ashes. The air was thick with the stench of plague and despair. Once-great marble buildings crumbled into silence, and the Tiber River, overflowing its banks, flooded the fields, spreading disease and death. People were hungry, sick, and frightened. Amid this darkness, a monk, reluctant and withdrawn from worldly honours, was called to be shepherd of a people in agony. That man was Gregory, born into a noble Roman family, a former urban prefect who had abandoned power for prayer. He had retreated into the quiet of the monastic life, seeking God in solitude, fasting, and the Psalms. However, as often happens in divine providence, the one who fled greatness was summoned to it. When the Roman clergy and people acclaimed him as Pope, he wept not for joy, but with fear and trembling, aware of the weight of souls he was now to bear (Demacopoulos, 2015).

The Cry of the People and the Answer of the Shepherd

The plague had left Rome in mourning. Corpses lay unburied. Children cried for food. The bells tolled endlessly. Gregory's first act was not a decree but a lamentation-turned-prayer. He called for a citywide penitential procession: men, women, children, and clergy walking barefoot through the streets, chanting psalms and pleading for mercy. It is said that as the people processed, the very air trembled with grief. Legend recounts that at the Mausoleum of Hadrian, Gregory looked up and saw a vision: The Archangel Michael, sword sheathed, a sign that the plague was lifting. That place became *Castel Sant'Angelo*, a monument to hope rising from suffering.

Feeding the Hungry, Healing the Soul

Gregory knew that hope must be made flesh. As food grew scarce, he opened the Church's granaries, using its estates to feed thousands daily.

He personally walked the streets to ensure the poor were cared for, often sitting with the sick, blessing the dying, and weeping with the grieving. The bishop of Rome had truly become a father to his people. In his writings, especially the *Pastoral Rule*, Gregory speaks with aching honesty of the burden of leadership. He describes the soul of a bishop as torn between contemplation and duty, longing for the silence of prayer, but pressed by the cries of the people (Gregory the Great, trans. Demacopoulos, 2007). He urged pastors to be gentle with sinners, patient with the weak, firm with the proud, and never self-righteous.

A Heart for the World Beyond Rome

What is astonishing is that even in his grief-laden Rome, Gregory's heart stretched outward. He dreamed of the conversion of the pagans in distant lands. When he saw fair-haired Anglo-Saxon enslaved people in the Roman market, he is said to have exclaimed, "*Not Angli, but Angeli, not Angles, but angels.*" He soon sent Augustine of Canterbury and a group of monks to evangelise Britain, planting the cross where swords once ruled. His tears turned into a mission; his sorrow became seeds of future sanctity (Mayr-Harting, 1991). Subsequently, Gregory governed with frail health. He was often sick, wracked with pain, and burdened by ceaseless work. His letters reveal a man who is tired, often discouraged, yet unwavering. He begged God for strength and wrote, "I have undertaken a burden which my shoulders cannot bear." However, he bore it for love. Not love of power, but love of Christ, crucified and poor.

When Gregory died in 604, the Church wept. Not only had a pope passed, but a man who had bled with his people, wept with them, and prayed them through the fire. He did not leave behind riches or armies, but something greater, a model of leadership as love, of greatness through humility, of authority that bows down to wash feet. History remembers him as Gregory the Great, yet perhaps heaven remembers him simply as Gregory, servant of the servants of God, a man who stood in the ruins and still sang the psalms.

2. Pope Pius XII (1939–1958): A Shepherd in the Shadow of War and Holocaust

Historical Context

On the eve of the most devastating conflict in human history, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli was elected Pope on March 2, 1939, taking the name

Pius XII. Just six months later, Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland would ignite World War II, plunging Europe and eventually the world into six years of carnage. Hitler's regime would orchestrate the systematic extermination of six million Jews, alongside countless other victims, in what would come to be known as the Holocaust. In such dark and unprecedented times, the newly elected pope found himself on a moral tightrope, balancing the spiritual integrity of the Church against the threats of political annihilation. The Vatican, surrounded by Fascist Italy and later occupied territories, was a fragile island of neutrality, yet a symbol of moral hope. The decisions made by Pope Pius XII during this period would not only shape his pontificate but also haunt the Church's conscience for generations.

A Silent Cry or Strategic Mercy?

Pius XII's wartime leadership has long been the subject of fierce historical and moral debate. To some, he is remembered as "Hitler's Pope," a leader too silent, too diplomatic, and too cautious in the face of evil (Cornwell, 1999). To others, especially more recent scholars with access to newly opened Vatican archives, he emerges as a deeply cautious but quietly courageous figure, working behind the scenes to save lives while trying to preserve the Church's ability to operate under oppressive regimes (Phayer, 2008; Marchione, 2000). One cannot forget the emotional heaviness of silence that surrounded his public stance. As Jews were being rounded up in Rome in October 1943, mere blocks from the Vatican, Pius XII did not issue an explicit public condemnation of the Nazi regime. To many, this silence felt like abandonment.

Nevertheless, beneath the silence, a hidden Church began to move. Convents and monasteries throughout Italy and beyond opened their doors, sheltering thousands of Jews. Secret baptismal certificates were issued. Vatican diplomats in Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia negotiated the release or protection of Jews facing deportation. The Pope himself intervened in diplomatic channels to try to soften Nazi policies, especially in countries under Axis influence (Zuccotti, 2000). Archival records now confirm that over 4,000 Jews were hidden in religious houses in Rome alone, many with the quiet encouragement or direct order of Pius XII. However, he bore this work not with triumph, but with the weight of secrecy, convinced that a louder voice might lead to more violent reprisals against Jews and Catholics alike.

A Heart Torn by War

Pius XII was no stranger to sorrow. As former Apostolic Nuncio to Germany and Secretary of State under Pius XI, he had witnessed firsthand the rise of Nazism and understood its spiritual threat. Throughout the war, he was plagued by scruples, prayerful discernment, and political entrapment. His Christmas radio messages were laced with veiled condemnations of racism, nationalism, and mass murder, though many felt the words were too abstract, too cautious for the times. Emotionally, Pius XII lived a lonely and burdened papacy. Eyewitnesses report him as increasingly isolated, fasting, praying, and weeping over the horrors he could neither prevent nor openly denounce with full force. His writings in those years express a soul-searching not only for answers but for moral clarity in a world gone mad.

Legacy: A Shadowed Light

Pius XII died in 1958. In the immediate aftermath of the war, many Jewish leaders praised his efforts, including Golda Meir, Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog, and the World Jewish Congress. However, by the 1960s and beyond, critics began to question his silence, especially as survivors asked why the moral voice of Christendom had not spoken louder.

Today, the legacy of Pius XII remains tactful.

- Some scholars portray him as a diplomatic realist, a man who tried to save lives through quiet channels rather than public defiance.

Nevertheless, it is perhaps most accurate to see him as a man of fear and faith, operating in a time when every word could cost thousands of lives. He embodied a Church that suffered silently, moved cautiously, but often acted mercifully in secret.

What Does It Mean to Shepherd in the Dark?

Pius XII forces the Church to wrestle with uncomfortable truths: What does leadership look like when all paths lead to danger? When the world demands moral clarity, but the consequences of clarity might be catastrophic? His life asks not for judgment, but for discernment. Not for condemnation, but for honest reckoning. He reminds us that the shepherd's path is often shadowed, and yet the call remains: *to guide, to protect, to love* even in silence, even in trembling.

3. Pope Saint John XXIII (1958–1963): The Gentle Revolutionary

The world did not expect much from Cardinal Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli when he was elected pope in October 1958. He was elderly, affable, and seen largely as a “transitional pope,” someone to hold the seat of Peter quietly until a younger, more dynamic successor would take over. However, Heaven had a different script. What the world mistook for brevity became a brilliant burst of transformation. In just five years, Pope John XXIII would not only reshape the Catholic Church’s engagement with the modern world but also rekindle its heart with warmth, humility, and an almost disarming simplicity.

A Heart Open to the World

Born into a humble farming family in Sotto il Monte, northern Italy, Angelo Roncalli never lost touch with the earthy kindness of peasant life. As pope, he brought this same pastoral warmth to the Vatican. The stiff formality of the Roman Curia was melted by his genuine smile, spontaneous gestures, and the twinkle in his eyes. His presence was not only papal but also paternal. Journalists called him *Il Papa Buono*, “the Good Pope.” However, his goodness was no mere sentiment; it was grounded in a vision of radical openness and renewal.

The Unexpected Thunder of Vatican II

On January 25, 1959, to the surprise of his cardinals, Pope John XXIII announced the convocation of an ecumenical council, the first since Vatican I, nearly a century earlier. The world reeled. What need was there for such a council? There was no heresy to condemn, no great doctrinal rupture. But John XXIII saw deeper. The Church, he said, must not merely preserve its teachings but present them in a way the modern world could understand, receive, and embrace. This was his vision of *aggiornamento*, bringing the Church up to date, not by compromising truth but by expressing it in a language of mercy, hope, and relevance.

His opening speech to the Council radiated this spirit:

“The Church has always opposed error... but nowadays the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than the weapons of severity.” (*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, 1962) This was not weakness; it was courageous compassion.

Leadership through Humility

John XXIII led not from above, but beside and below. He refused the high ceremonial throne when carried through St. Peter’s; instead, he

reached out to children, prison inmates, Jewish friends, and the sick. Diplomats spoke of his subtle wisdom. Theologians marvelled at his spiritual intuition. Ordinary people felt seen, loved. He once told a visitor who worried about the Church's future: "Look at the sunrise, not the shadows." His optimism was not naïve; it was rooted in deep faith in the Holy Spirit guiding the Church, even though stormy skies. Moreover, his papacy unfolded during the Cold War, when the world stood on the edge of nuclear catastrophe. During the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, both U.S. President Kennedy and Soviet Premier Khrushchev received John XXIII's urgent message for peace. The world watched as his calm voice of moral reason helped avert global disaster. His encyclical "*Pacem in Terris*" (Peace on Earth) remains a landmark in Catholic social teaching, addressed not just to Catholics but to "all people of good will," emphasising human dignity, rights, and justice.

Legacy: The Smile that Shook the Church Awake

When Pope John XXIII died on June 3, 1963, the world wept. Even those outside the Church mourned. He had reminded a weary postwar generation that holiness was not about severity, but about joy, service, and inclusion. He had broken open the windows of the Church to let in the fresh air of dialogue, conscience, and charity. His successor, Pope Paul VI, would carry forward and complete the Second Vatican Council, but the seed was John's, a seed sown with laughter, tears, and the quiet power of a soul steeped in prayer. He is remembered not merely as a transitional pope, but as a transformational shepherd, a man whose leadership lay in listening, whose courage lay in kindness, and whose reforms began not in policy, but in the renewal of the heart.

4. Pope John Paul II (1978–2005): A Shepherd Beneath the Shadow of the Cross

Historical Context

When Cardinal Karol Józef Wojtyła of Poland stepped onto the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica on October 16, 1978, the world was stunned. A non-Italian pope had not been elected in over 450 years. But this son of Wadowice, raised under Nazi occupation and forged in the crucible of Soviet totalitarianism, would become one of the most consequential popes in modern history, a shepherd chosen from the bloodlands of the 20th century. The world he inherited was trembling: atheistic regimes ruled half the globe, the Cold War threatened nuclear

annihilation, secularism was draining the soul of the West, and inside the Church, scandals and dissent festered quietly.

A Prophet to Tyrants and the Youth

John Paul II's first words, "*Be not afraid!*" were not just a scriptural echo; they were a battle cry against fear itself. A heroic confrontation with Communist oppression marked his early pontificate. In 1979, he returned to Poland. Over a million people gathered to hear him preach. In the silence that followed his prayer for the Holy Spirit to descend, something unthinkable stirred: an enslaved nation began to believe in its dignity once more. His mere presence ignited Solidarity, the first nonviolent labour movement in a Soviet bloc nation, which eventually contributed to the collapse of the Iron Curtain. With words, not weapons, he helped dismantle an empire of lies. At the same time, John Paul II reached into the hearts of a generation growing cold to faith. He launched World Youth Day, embracing millions of young people across continents, reminding them that "you are not the sum of your weaknesses, but of the Father's love for you." In an age of cynicism, he preached purpose and identity grounded in Christ.

A Body Broken Yet Offered

On May 13, 1981, as he greeted pilgrims in St. Peter's Square, a Turkish gunman shot the Pope at close range. He collapsed in a pool of blood. The world gasped. Yet he survived. As he recovered, the Pope publicly forgave his assassin, Mehmet Ali Ağca, and later visited him in prison. The bullet that nearly killed him was later placed in Our Lady of Fatima's crown, a sign of his deep Marian devotion and belief that he was spared for a mission. Over time, Parkinson's disease began to claim his once-athletic body. But even as he stooped, trembled, and slurred his words, he refused to hide from the world. He showed millions that human dignity is not in productivity or power, but in bearing the cross with grace. His suffering became a living homily. However, this papacy was not without wounds. As allegations of clerical sexual abuse began surfacing, John Paul II was criticised for responding too slowly, particularly due to his long-standing trust in certain clerics later revealed to be abusers. His deep pastoral loyalty and resistance to scandalising the faithful may have clouded his judgment in early years. However, toward the end of his pontificate, he began laying the groundwork for reforms that his successors would implement more rigorously.

Legacy: A Global Shepherd Who Walked with Saints and Sinners

By the time of his death in 2005, John Paul II had visited 129 countries, canonised more saints than all his predecessors combined, and issued major teachings, including Theology of the Body, a profound meditation on human love, sexuality, and divine purpose. His funeral drew millions to Rome, and the cry that echoed in St. Peter's Square, "*Santo subito!*" captured the soul of a Church that had watched him lead not with polished politics, but with wounded holiness. In him, the world witnessed a pope who stood before empires and evil without flinching, who fell beneath bullets and illness yet rose each time, and who preached mercy even as scandal threatened trust. He was not a perfect pope, but he was a human bridge between suffering and sanctity, showing that leadership in tragic times requires both clarity of truth and tenderness of heart.

5. Pope Francis (2013 – Present): A Shepherd Under the Weight of the World

Historical Context

Pope Francis, born Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Argentina, stepped onto the world stage in 2013, carrying the weight of a fractured Church and a suffering planet. His pontificate has unfolded against the backdrop of the devastating sexual abuse crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate catastrophe, migrant displacement, and political polarisation that have shaken the very soul of global Catholicism. He is the first Jesuit pope, the first from the Global South, and the first to take the name "Francis," a signal of humility, poverty, and a preferential option for the poor. His ministry has become a pilgrimage of tenderness through a wounded world.

Enumerated Actions and Pastoral Interventions

1. Prophetic Response to the Sexual Abuse Crisis

Francis inherited a deeply mistrusted Church, ravaged by decades of clerical sexual abuse. He instituted canonical reforms and launched unprecedented investigations (e.g., in Chile and regarding McCarrick). While his record is not without criticism, he called for zero tolerance, implemented the *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* decree for episcopal accountability, and emphasised listening to survivors with empathy, breaking long-standing cultures of silence.

2. Shepherding in the Shadow of COVID-19

In March 2020, during one of the darkest moments of the pandemic, Francis stood alone in a rain-soaked St. Peter's Square, raising the

Eucharist in a haunting *Urbi et Orbi* blessing. His fragile frame, framed by silence and storm, became a global symbol of spiritual leadership. He launched the Commission for COVID-19 Response, mobilising Catholic institutions worldwide to assist the most vulnerable.

3. Climate Advocacy: Laudato Si' and Beyond

In his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Francis issued a spiritual and ecological cry for an “integral ecology,” linking environmental destruction with human suffering. He framed care for creation as a moral and theological imperative, mobilising Catholic institutions globally and influencing secular climate policy.

4. Human Fraternity and Global Dialogue

Through *Fratelli Tutti* and the Document on Human Fraternity (co-signed with Grand Imam Ahmed el-Tayeb), Francis championed interfaith dialogue, solidarity with migrants, and nonviolence in a polarised world. He reminds the Church that “no one is saved alone,” calling for global friendship over nationalistic isolation.

5. Synodality: A Church That Walks Together

Francis launched the most ambitious ecclesial listening process in modern history: The Synod on Synodality (2021–2024) through listening circles, diocesan reports, and global discernment, he envisions a Church that listens, includes, and discerns not by imposing from above, but by walking with the People of God.

6. Pastoral Theology of Mercy and Inclusion

His apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, emphasised pastoral accompaniment for families, especially those in irregular situations. Francis consistently calls for compassion over condemnation, especially regarding LGBT persons, the divorced, and those marginalised in the Church. He has reframed doctrine through the lens of mercy, often provoking both admiration and anxiety.

A Legacy in Motion

Pope Francis's legacy remains unfinished, yet unmistakably transformative. Critics accuse him of ambiguity and doctrinal laxity; supporters celebrate his prophetic pastoralism and humility. However, few deny that Francis is reshaping the contours of Catholic leadership, prioritising relationship over rule, presence over power, and mercy over moralism. In a Church tempted by nostalgia or division, he presses forward with the simple gospel conviction: “*Who am I to judge?*” His is the voice of a shepherd who smells like his sheep, who weeps with the world, and who believes the Church must be a field hospital more than a fortress.

Coping Mechanisms & Emotional Skills Across All Figures:

Over the course of the 20th and early 21st centuries, five popes faced significant global crises, each demonstrating distinct strategies for coping and emotional resilience. Despite differences in their approaches, they share recurring themes of ethical clarity, empathy, and purposeful action, illustrating how the papacy has adapted to the demands of turbulent historical moments (O'Malley, 2019).

Pope Benedict XV (1914–1922): The Quiet Advocate for Peace

During World War I, Pope Benedict XV maintained strict neutrality, positioning the Vatican as an impartial mediator. He spearheaded humanitarian efforts spanning all sides of the conflict, prioritising human dignity over political alliances. His steadfast commitment to peace, even in the face of rejection from warring powers, revealed remarkable emotional resilience (National Catholic Reporter, 2014). Encyclicals such as *Pacem in Terris* (1963) and *Dei Munus Pulcherrimum* (1920) reflect his moral vision, emphasising reconciliation and principled diplomacy.

Pope Pius XII (1939–1958): The Strategic Diplomat Amid Totalitarianism

Throughout World War II, Pope Pius XII upheld the Vatican's neutrality, enabling the Church to act as a discreet intermediary between the opposing powers. He implemented careful diplomatic measures, including support for covert networks aiding Jews and other persecuted populations. His reliance on measured silence allowed the Church to continue its humanitarian mission while minimising confrontation with authoritarian regimes (Kertzer, 2022; National Catholic Register, 2020). In encyclicals such as *Summi Pontificatus* (1939), Pius XII communicated moral principles while avoiding overt provocation, emphasising the protection of human dignity.

Pope John XXIII (1958–1963): The Pastoral Reformer

Pope John XXIII approached leadership with a focus on dialogue and the modernisation of the Church's structures. By convening the Second Vatican Council (1962), he sought to reconcile long-standing traditions with contemporary societal changes. His leadership demonstrated high emotional intelligence, expressed through humility, empathy, and a joyful disposition, fostering cohesion within the Church and encouraging reform without alienating conservative elements (The

Divine Mercy, 2019; *Pacem in Terris*, 1963). John XXIII's style blended pastoral sensitivity with visionary action.

Pope John Paul II (1978–2005): The Global Witness and Advocate of Human Dignity

Pope John Paul II integrated his personal suffering with public ministry, using his struggle with Parkinson's disease as an example of human endurance and spiritual growth. His resilience was underpinned by theological reflection, notably in *Salvifici Doloris* (1984), which presented suffering as a transformative and redemptive experience (Weigel, 2005; Vatican, 1984). Additionally, he promoted global solidarity through interfaith dialogue and political engagement, including support for nonviolent resistance to oppressive regimes in Eastern Europe.

Pope Francis (2013–Present): The Advocate of Dialogue and Inclusion

Pope Francis emphasises a pastoral model grounded in mercy, accompaniment, and openness. He promotes a “culture of encounter,” engaging with people of diverse faiths and beliefs to cultivate understanding and peace. His emotional intelligence is evident in acts of compassion, including advocacy for migrants and refugees, environmental stewardship (*Laudato Si'*, 2015), and raising awareness of mental health issues (Catholic Apostolate Centre, 2020). Francis's leadership prioritises dialogue, discernment, and mercy-driven reform, shaping the Church's response to a fragmented global landscape (O'Malley, 2019). The coping strategies and emotional skills of these five popes illustrate how the Church has navigated historical challenges across different eras. From Benedict XV's neutral diplomacy to Francis's inclusive engagement, each pontiff exemplified commitment to human dignity, moral clarity, and strategic foresight. Together, their leadership demonstrates the evolving role of spiritual authority in addressing global crises, social injustices, and the pastoral needs of the faithful.

Conclusion

Throughout history, Catholic leadership has been profoundly tested by the burdens of tragic events, pandemics, wars, ideological oppression, persecution, and scandal. In these moments of profound crisis, the papacy and episcopate have functioned not only as institutional leaders but also as moral and spiritual shepherds, guiding the Church through

the shadows of suffering and uncertainty. This study has shown that whether through Pope Gregory the Great's response to plague and civic collapse, Pope Pius XII's complex diplomacy during the Holocaust, or Pope John XXIII's prophetic stand amidst political violence, these leaders exercised extraordinary courage, faith, and adaptive pastoral strategies. Their coping mechanisms, such as spiritual discernment, prophetic preaching, institutional innovation, and personal sacrifice, demonstrate that leadership in tragic times is not measured merely by administrative efficiency but by fidelity to Christ and compassionate presence with the suffering. They navigated not only external turmoil but also internal contradictions within the Church, modelling a form of shepherding that was both deeply human and radically Christological.

The enduring legacy of these figures challenges current and future ecclesial leaders to embrace a form of leadership that is contemplative in discernment, courageous in action, and humble in service. Tragic times, though deeply painful, have been occasions for grace, transformation, and renewed authenticity in Catholic leadership. Thus, the call remains urgent and clear: to shepherd not in fear or silence, but in the hope, truth, and mercy that reflect the heart of the Good Shepherd Himself.

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