Columns
Religious Life



Pope Francis greets the crowd as he arrives for his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on April 27, 2022. (Reuters/CNS/Guglielmo Mangiapane)



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Just after my 21st birthday, I parked myself in front of my tiny dorm TV to watch the funeral of Pope John Paul II. I was in my last year of college as a religious studies major, and he was the only pope I'd ever known. He was an icon for my generation. I'd seen him once as his Popemobile whizzed past me during his 1999 visit to St. Louis, Missouri. That was my first realization that the Catholic Church was bigger than the parish I attended on Sundays. Pope John Paul II's death and the subsequent conclave were major personal and ecclesial milestones. I vividly remember the classroom conversations and news coverage that came with the end of an era. Even the church bells ringing out announcing a new pope.

As a divinity student discerning religious life, I knew Pope Benedict XVI mostly through his writing. I never had the opportunity to see him in person. Yet the impact of his resignation and his prayerful manner of living, especially at the end of his life, have left a lasting impression on me. He led the church with integrity and humility.

For the past 12 years, I've prayed for Pope Francis by name each morning in our community prayers. I've been blessed to see him on five occasions in the past eight years (three times in Rome and at two different World Youth Days). Watching my third pontiff, I have a deeper appreciation of the burden and responsibility of the role and the value of different leadership styles.

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So, when news came that the pope was ill, I prayed for him. Then podcast hosts, social media graphics, WhatsApp notifications and the petitions at Mass also invited me to pray for Pope Francis. The secular media's coverage of Pope Francis' health doesn’t surprise me. I am surprised by their encouragement to pray for him.

Perhaps this is the only pope some of them have known. Perhaps others know him from his writings. And maybe there's a deeper reason why Catholics and non-Catholics feel compelled to pray for him. Maybe they're like me, and they feel they know him. Maybe it's through following him on social media or news articles. Or because of the recent synod. Or from his pandemic prayer service in March 2020. Or because he's outspoken and says things you (dis)agree with.

Pope Francis has made an impression. He's shown us he wants to be a brother to all, radiating the joy of the gospel and inviting us to a deeper relationship with Jesus. At

least, this is what he's done for me. I join my prayers to those of millions around the world in praying for the repose of Pope Francis' soul and his successor.