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Archbishop Georg Gänswein, private secretary to Pope Benedict XVI, kisses the coffin of the late pope after his body was placed into it in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican on Jan. 4, 2023. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Sr. Joan Chittister

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There is an insight in church communications that is seldom talked about but is also, strangely, never forgotten. When popes come to the days before they step over the threshold of this life into the arms of Creation, there's a kind of hush that takes over.

Attendants and caretakers, even personal friends themselves, seem to be caught in the in-between now.

There is so much to say and at the same time, there is nothing to say at all, except perhaps the last of the prayers that will seal this entire life.

Yet the one unfinished conversation that catches everyone of any level of relationship here — in this situation — is surely the one that we have all been wondering about for months. For years, in fact.

I have been to the funerals of five popes in my life and in every one of them, I found myself caught in the ever-tightening crowds around us and swaying back and forth long enough to pick up the eternal question behind me: "Popes come and popes go" someone said. "What else is there?"

There is, for some reason apparently, a personal need for that answer. Why? Because if popes, too, need to choose their last and final efforts, so do we. Life does not end at retirement. In fact, the personal need for that question is that it makes us aware, too, that life is not over until we spend it all for the good of others.

So what do popes spend the last of life on? Simple: Popes go on carrying the church through the winds and dark of every era so that the Spirit who is with us now may show us the way. So that the darkness of the moon may brighten our steps and keep us on the path. So that in the light of day we never lose sight of the burning sun in the black rain in front of us.



German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, sprinkles holy water on the casket of Pope John Paul II during his funeral Mass in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican in this April 8, 2005, file photo. (OSV News/Catholic Press Photo)

Popes go on teaching us, showing us, warning us, what they themselves now understood as the will of God for us, in us, because of us always.

It is the pope who leads us through every last era of change or requires us to discover it ourselves so that as the popes themselves persevere to the end, we learn as well to carry our share of bringing the church itself to join the process of fulfillment for the sake of the rest of us.

Then, little by little, we will grow as they did from one mistake to another till they could see clearly what they were meant to carry until the end.

Each of them leaves a message behind so that we might find our own way to the deepest part of our own growth.

For instance, in each of them we see a struggle of our own.

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Pope John XXIII came to the papacy with an experience of the world few bishops anywhere would have seen. He had been the apostolic visitor to Bulgaria in 1925-1931 and the nuncio to France in 1944. He promoted ecumenical movements everywhere he went. In doctrinal matters, he was a traditionalist but moved beyond the past to enliven the church of today.

He died shortly after opening the greatest council since the 15th century on the renewal of the entire church. He did not live to see the Second Vatican Council to completion. In September 1962, he was diagnosed with stomach cancer and died on June 3, 1963.

Pope Paul VI, who died in 1978 was a quiet man who went softly through life welcoming the councils of the world with which he had been left after the death of John XXIII.

Without Paul, the Second Vatican Council would never have survived, would never have surfaced. The whole notion of whether or not a great review and renewal of Catholicism was meant to go on, was anybody's guess. And many hoped to see it disappear with John XXIII's demise.



The body of blessed John XXIII is seen during his June 1963 funeral in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. (CNS/Catholic Press Photo/Giancarlo Giuliani)

Until Paul VI stood up to tell the church that the Spirit who raised up this conference would guide it home. It was the Spirit who would now know what was needed to be taught.

This pope was clear: He trusted the Spirit to give new life to a church already long dead.

It was Paul VI who had to face the challenges of implementing the decrees of the council in a global world and emerging moral confusion. He invited open dialogue with other faiths. He encouraged cooperation among mixed communities. He crowned the council with his ability to bring continuity with the past and development of modernity.

His was the new era in the church that revered the past, while opening the church to the new world at the same time.

Pope John Paul II, the first non-Italian pope in almost 500 years, was intent on rebuilding his own church, the one that had opened the doors to LGBT people and women and the kind of obedience that is cured only by a return to an age-old past.

We were, he realized, now confronted with two churches. The older church was stable and determinative but not growing. The new church was defined by clear norms which, he believed, made for sanctity however long it took, but was less appealing to a nuclear world that shrugged off religion and questioned the old.

Now faith meant the need to live beyond the system. It was an invitation to new life, a life John Paul could never agree was really religion at all. This new path demanded the ability of affiliating with the rest of the church who do not follow our calendars but do believe that Christianity is a truer homecoming than Catholicism alone.

The church that John Paul II left us was more the church of the past rather than the church of the new world. Its eternal value is what keeps in our sight where we have come from in the hope to find what is home again there.



Pope Francis prays at the tomb of Pope Pius XII in the crypt of St. Peter's Basilica as he marks All Souls' Day at the Vatican on Nov. 2, 2021. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Pope Pius XII was far too conscious of the possible loss of this church even to begin to wonder what it could have been that this pope could possibly have been carrying for us. Really?

It was an act unheard of in the Vatican world. Pius XII went to his slow and laborious death silent and withdrawn. He had been a canon lawyer — a position not known for its excitement — but in his case the discovery was immense. Pius XII had traveled Europe to capture the signature of political politicians who, on the edge of war, were willing to protect the church from political destruction.

The young lawyer canvassed thrones in Europe for separate rights for each of them to negotiate concordats between the Vatican and Europe's sovereign nations. Pius got countries to promise to protect the surge of concordats the church would need to survive a world war. Even Hitler approved the agreement between Germany and the Vatican.

Concordats were agreements between religious and secular institutions on independent issues. Pius XII negotiated each of these new legal documents that had been seldom used before Napoleon. Pius XII, on the other hand, used concordats to engage European countries independently in the protection of the church.

He carried the entire church to safety as each of these popes have brought careful and singular concerns with them as they "came and went" in our own world and our own concerns.

February 2013, the end of the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI, is a dramatic one. With calm, caring manner, the pope simply announced that he had decided to leave the papacy, a move few ever thought was possible at all. Benedict knew what the people did not know: not only was he drained physically, he was also facing depths of collegiality, none of them defined.

It was a lesson to us all that the church in this world needed to become part of this world if we are to support, to expand and to love it.



Pope Francis greets retired Pope Benedict XVI during an encounter for the elderly in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Sept. 28, 2014. (CNS/Paul Haring)

And now in our day, Pope Francis. A young Argentinian Jesuit who lived first at the dinner table of the military and learned there the pain wrought on the poor. But it takes a while to see what you cannot see in political systems that feed us to keep us quiet. Bergolio went through that until it was his own young priests who could make him see what was happening — and now able to see it through.

He had hoped to have been able to tame the political system around him, trying to make peace between the oppressors of the poor, the starving of their children, and the excrement on our own souls.

And it led to what? To the entire church as his parish.

And so his concern for the entire world.

To the beginning of synodality, to the bringing of the entire church together to face its growth, its darkness, its needs and its love.

It led us to the expansion of the cardinalate and our understanding of the church around the world.

It brought us through him our understanding and connection of the globe everywhere.

In our time, in the Spirit of our times, we have seen buried in the hearts of the popes who have gone before us their personal attempts to bring us through what the era demands but which we cannot see from long-range vision.

But one thing we do know, whether we can see it ourselves or not, our popes will go on helping us understand what next we, too, must be about if we are ever to be who and what we say we are.

This story appears in the **Pope Francis' health crisis** feature series. View the full series.