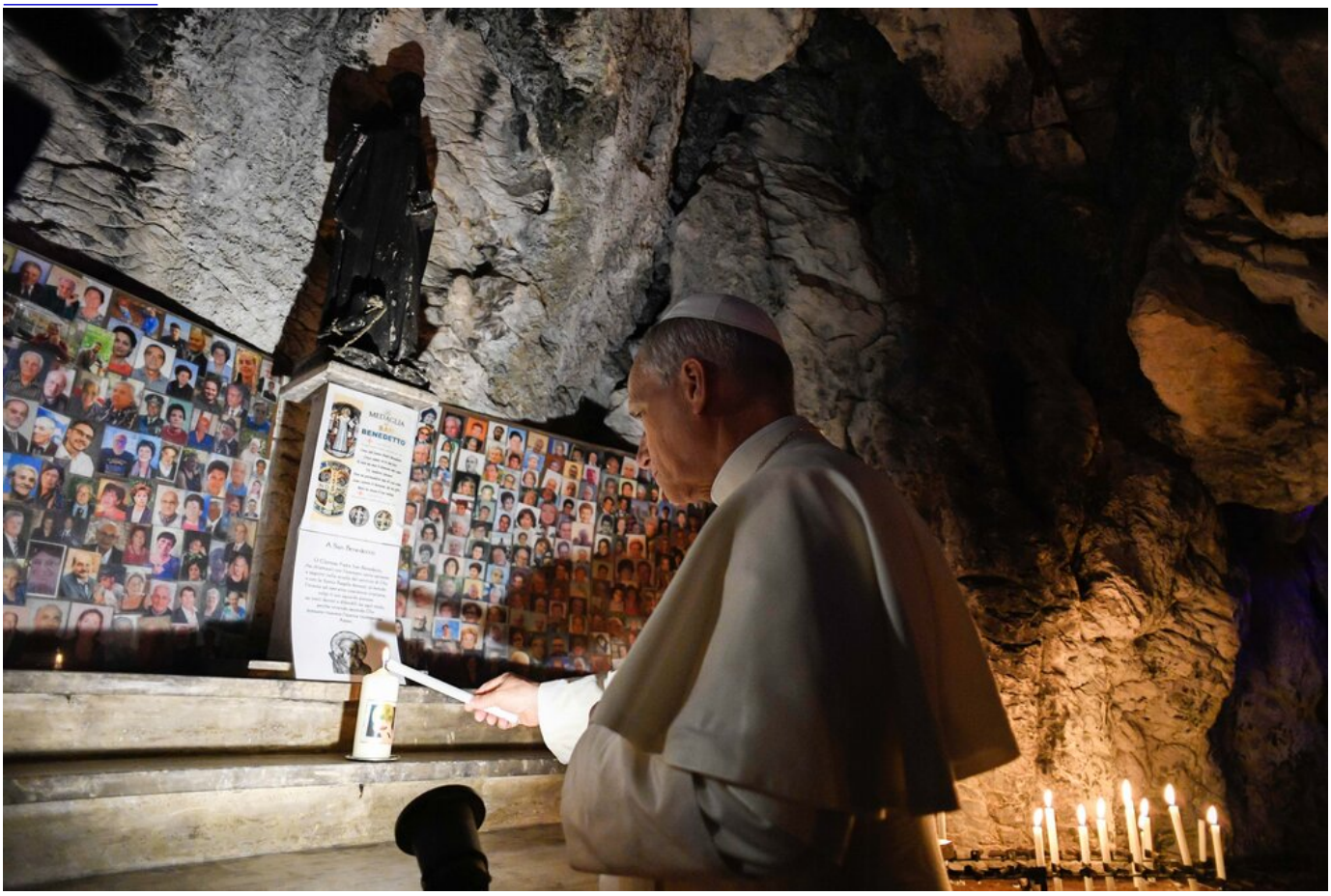
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Pope Leo XIV lights a candle and prays in the Cave of St. Benedict at the Shrine of Our Lady of Grace of Mentorella near Guadagnolo, Italy, Aug. 19, 2025. Tradition holds that St. Benedict lived in the cave as a hermit for two years during his early monastic life. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Pope Leo XIV paid a private visit to the Shrine of Our Lady of Grace of Mentorella, high in the Monti Prenestini mountain range of central Italy.

On his last full day in Castel Gandolfo, Aug. 19, the pope made the hour journey northeast to pray in the shrine church and the Cave of St. Benedict, where a pious tradition holds that St. Benedict lived for two years early in the sixth century.

Leo visited with the Polish priests of the Resurrectionist order, which has cared for the shrine since 1857, and they helped him ring the church bells at noon before praying the Angelus together.

The pope returned to Castel Gandolfo for the afternoon and was scheduled to return to the Vatican that night.

St. John Paul II visited the Mentorella shrine often as a bishop and cardinal, went there to pray before the conclave that elected him in 1978 and returned two weeks after his election.

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"This place, hidden among the mountains, has particularly fascinated me. From it, one's eyes can range over and admire the magnificent view of the Italian landscape," he said during his Oct. 29, 1978, visit.

After the Annunciation, he said, Mary went to "the hill country" to visit her cousin Elizabeth, and it was there that she sang the "Magnificat."

"I wanted to come here, among these mountains, to sing the 'Magnificat' in Mary's footsteps," St. John Paul had said.

Exactly 27 years later — Oct. 29, 2005 — Pope Benedict XVI made a private visit to Mentorella in memory of St. John Paul's visit.

Tradition holds that the shrine, perched 3,300 feet above sea level, originally was built under the order of the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century.