

Book won't be easy reading at Vatican

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Nearly 11 years ago, the world was stunned by the sudden death of Pope John Paul I only a month after his election to the papacy.

The death certificate identified the cause of death as a heart attack, but almost immediately rumors began circulating that Papa Luciani had been the victim of foul play.

The rumors were fed by conflicting statements made during the two weeks following his death by Vatican spokesmen, members of the papal household and other important witnesses, official and unofficial alike.

Discrepancies were found in these stories concerning who actually found the body, when it was found, the official cause of death, the estimated time of death, the timing and legality of the embalment, what the pope had in his hands at the moment of death, the true state of his health in the months leading up to his death, the whereabouts of personal belongings from the papal bedroom, whether or not the Curia had ordered and performed a secret autopsy, and whether or not the morticians were summoned before the body was offi-

cially found.

Rumors that had heretofore been whispered in private were given public expression five years ago in David Yallop's sensational book, *In God's Name*, which concluded that Pope John Paul I had not died a natural death on September 28, 1978. According to Yallop, Papa Luciani had been the victim of an assassination plot hatched by high-ranking churchmen fearful of losing their jobs. Yallop's book set the world abuzz with gossip about intrigue and murder in the Vatican, and was a source of profound dismay within the Catholic Church itself.

Three years later another British journalist, John Cornwell, came to the Vatican for an interview with Archbishop John Foley, president of the Commission for Social Communications.

Cornwell needed some help on a study he was doing on alleged supernatural phenomena, including the reported apparitions of the Blessed Mother in Medjogorje, Yugoslavia.

As his interview with Archbishop Foley was winding down, the archbishop surprised Cornwell with a suggestion that he turn his attention instead to the death of Pope John Paul I. Foley expressed the hope

that Cornwell might lay to rest once and for all the terrible assassination rumors.

Cornwell took up the challenge, and his new book, *A Thief in the Night: The Death of Pope John Paul I* (Viking), is the fruit of his efforts.

Pope John Paul I was not murdered, Cornwell argues. He was the victim of incompetence and neglect — his own and those around him.

"It is apparent, from the vantage of hindsight, that Albino Luciani was singularly ill-equipped by experience and by nature for the role of Pontiff" (p.262). The new pope knew it and constantly said so to his intimates, especially at meals, and more emphatically than ever on the very night of his death.

Others knew it, too. Vatican officials made fun of him behind his back, the book asserts. "The new Pope was scorned for his waddling walk, his ungainly appearance, his askew zucchetto, his naive discourses — described by one cleric as a 'Reader's Digest mentality.'" (p.268).

Moreover, he had come to the papacy with serious health problems. His legs and feet were so swollen on the day of his installation, for example, that he couldn't

Samuel anoints David for a mysterious ministry

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

Everyone in Bethlehem was wondering why the prophet Samuel had come. No one had seen him for many months, so his sudden arrival surprised everyone.

Only King Saul knew why Samuel had stayed away for such a long time. The prophet was in mourning. Saul's foolish disobedience to the Lord's commands had cost him the kingship.

"Why do you come to Bethlehem?" the town elders asked Samuel.

"I am going to offer a sacrifice to the Lord," Samuel replied. "Come and join me. Please invite Jesse and his family to come as well."

Samuel saw the question in their faces, but he offered no explanation. The Lord had told him to come to Bethlehem and choose a new king for Israel. King Saul's successor would be one of Jesse's sons.

Before the sacrifice, Jesse came and brought his sons, one by one, to meet Samuel. When he met the eldest son, Eliab, Samuel thought, "He is tall and handsome. Surely this well-spoken man must be God's choice for king."

"You are judging by appearances, Samuel," the Lord told him. "I judge by what is in a person's heart. Eliab is not my choice."

Jesse brought six more sons forward to meet Samuel. And each time, the Lord

made it clear that none of these young men were destined for kingship.

Now Samuel was puzzled. "Do you have any more sons?" He asked Jesse.

"Just my youngest boy," Jesse answered. "He is out in the fields tending to my sheep."

"We will not begin the sacrifice until he joins us," Samuel said, still not revealing to anyone the reason for his actions.

A short time later, a servant hastened in, followed by a young man with a ruddy complexion and a pleasant expression. When this boy was introduced to Samuel, the Lord told him: "Here, at last, is the one who I want to be the next king of Israel."



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

even wear shoes for the ceremony.

And yet never once during his month-long pontificate did a Vatican physician attend him, and never once did the Vatican pharmacy ever fill an order for his medication.

Cornwell reports that Pope John Paul I had on more than one occasion begged God to let him die.

That fact is significant. "There is extensive evidence," Cornwell notes, "of a connection between the loss of will to live and sudden death" (p.265).

Cornwell concludes: "John Paul I wanted to die, the conditions conveniently prevailed, the spectators did not rush forward to prevent him... The warnings of a mortal illness were clear for all to see; the signs were ignored. Little or nothing was done to succor or to save him" (p. 265).

There's even more to the story, but that will have to wait until next week.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *A Thief in the Night: The Death of Pope John Paul I* is not available in book stores at this time.



THE BIBLE CORNER

No one that day knew why Samuel took a flask of olive oil and anointed David. "Samuel is an old man," One of the elders suggested. "Perhaps the boy will become a prophet and serve as Samuel's successor."

"Maybe he will become a priest," another commented.

There was no mistaking the fact that David had been selected by God for some special work. After his anointing, it was clear to everyone that he had been touched by the Spirit of the Lord.

At the same time, an evil spirit seemed to take hold of King Saul. He was tormented by fits of anger and depression.

His moods became so dark that some of his servants said to him, "Maybe music will soothe your troubled mind."

"Find me someone who plays well and bring him here to the palace," King Saul commanded.

A few days later, David, who was a very fine musician, was chosen to play his harp for the king. Jesse sent the boy with one of his own goats and some wine as presents for the king.

The music did help King Saul's dark spells and a short time later, he requested that David stay in his service at the palace. Everyone in Bethlehem saw this as a great honor for the family of Jesse. That is why Samuel anointed David, they thought.

Scripture Reference: 1 Samuel 16.
Meditation: We have all been anointed by God to serve as the witnesses of Jesus Christ.

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