

Incompetence, neglect may have killed pope

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

John Cornwell's new book, *A Thief in the Night: The Death of Pope John Paul I* (Viking), discredits the speculation that the pope's sudden death on September 28, 1978, was the result of foul play.

To be sure, Papa Luciani was a victim — but of incompetence and neglect, not murder.

The Patriarch of Venice had entered the papacy a month earlier bearing two major liabilities: poor health and a basic lack of preparation for the rigors of the job.

According to Cornwell, that combination proved literally fatal. So discouraged was the pope by the demands of his new office that he seems to have both nurtured a death-wish and neglected his life-preserving medications.

Those immediately around him — especially his two priest-secretaries and the Secretary of State, Cardinal Jean Villot —

ignored the obvious danger signals.

Cornwell, in fact, accuses Villot of a "disastrous and surely culpable" miscalculation of the pope's administrative capacities and his state of health.

Villot was "at him day and night," even when the pope tried to take a quiet walk in the Vatican Gardens.

"Night and day Villot appeared, pressing him for answers and solutions, nagging and goading. We shall probably never know the full extent of the administrative pressures he imposed on the new Pope," Cornwell writes. "All we know for certain is that far from allowing him an easy introduction, Villot — the fidgety man who liked an empty desk for himself — attempted to get rid of Paul VI's backlog in the first few weeks" (p.263).

Following John Paul I's death a distraught Cardinal Villot told people that he believed he had "destroyed the pope with pressure of work," Cornwall writes.

"The situation was no better within the papal household itself. The pope's two secretaries, Don Diego Lorenzi and Father (now Bishop) John Magee, were "emotional, at loggerheads."

Lorenzi was described as being "in over his head." He was lost in the Vatican and seized every opportunity to get out to visit friends, including, it would seem, on the very night of the pope's death.

Magee was critical of Lorenzi's frequent absences. And yet Magee himself, on the pope's last day of life on this earth and after hearing the pope complain that he was feeling ill, went out for two hours that afternoon to collect some books.

Moreover, when Cardinal Villot appeared at the papal apartments at 6:30 that evening, Magee failed to inform him that the pope had by that time twice complained of feeling ill during the day.

On the basis of his many interviews, the author constructed the following hypothe-



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

sis about what really went on the night of September 28, 1978:

Father Magee, on his way to bed, passes by the pope's rooms and notices that the lights are still on. He opens the door a crack and sees the pope on the floor, "still dressed, his hands bunched in agony at his chest."

He has been struck down not by a heart attack, as the death certificate would have it, but by a pulmonary embolism due to a condition of abnormal coagulability of the blood.

Magee is distraught. He awaits Don Lorenzi's return from his night out and takes him into the pope's apartment. There is panic and remorse. Popes aren't supposed to die like this — alone, without the last rites.

How will they explain why they didn't call a doctor, notwithstanding the pope's insistence to the contrary? How will they explain their absences from the papal apartments, in spite of the pope's complaints of feeling ill? How will they explain their failure to inform Cardinal Villot or the Vatican Health Service?

Would not a sudden death, like "a thief in the night," be a more fitting end for a pope?

And so they carry his body to the bed, change it from cassock to night clothes, and prop it up against the pillows with reading glasses and papers in hand — left to be "discovered" there by Father Magee in the morning. Except that Sister Vincenza got there first.

When the author presented the secretaries with his hypothesis, they denied it, insisting that everything happened just as they said it happened.

Whatever the truth of the matter, John Cornwell is convinced that there is more than enough blame to go around — beyond Cardinal Villot, Father Magee, Don Lorenzi, or indeed the pope himself.

To begin with, the cardinals who elected Albino Luciani were at fault for naively thinking that he was qualified to be pope simply because he seemed so holy and prayerful. (A few U.S. cardinals made that point, proudly, in television interviews following the conclave.)

The pope's doctors were at fault — both Da Ros in Venice (one of the few people who refused to be interviewed for the book) and Buzzonetti in the Vatican — for not ensuring a swift transfer of medical records and care.

But the neglect and incompetence were also systemic.

More about that next week, in a third and final installment.

Jesus Christ's ministry revolved around teaching others to pray

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's readings: (R3) Luke 11:1-13; (R1) Genesis 18:20-32; (R2) Colossians 2:12-14.

St. Luke seems to accent three things about Jesus: His concern for women, the universality of His teaching and His prayer life.

"One day Jesus was praying," Luke noted. His praying must have had such an effect on His disciples that they asked Him to teach them how to pray. Imagine! Jews prayed seven times a day, yet they said, "Lord, teach us to pray..."

Jesus answered their "prayer" by teaching them the "Lord's Prayer." In this prayer, St. Matthew has seven petitions; St. Luke has only five. Both begin with the word "Father." For that is the basic reason why we should go confidently to prayer: we go as a child to his father.

"Hallowed be your name;" that is, may God show us all just who He is.

"Your kingdom come;" that is, may we all by our lives extend God's rule over more and more people.

"Give us each day our daily bread." St. John Damascene defined prayer as the "petition of fitting things from God." To pray for temporal blessings is fitting. We should do this daily.

"Forgive us our sins." We are soul as well as body. We need not only bread for our bodies, but forgiveness for our souls as well. We need to be forgiving, for we all are sinners and only the merciful shall obtain mercy. We must not burn down the bridge over which we too must pass.

"And subject us not to the trial." In 1864 a Bowery bum with a slashed throat was brought into Bellevue Hospital in New York City. The man had a fever, suffered intense pain from the laceration on his throat, and had lost a great deal of blood. He was unable to recover, for his body had been weakened by excessive alcoholism and malnutrition. After several days he died with only thirty-eight cents in his pocket.

As the story unfolded, however, it was discovered that this man was not just another Bowery bum. He had been well known all over America, famous for his



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

songs. He had charmed America into singing *De Camptown Races, Oh! Susanna, Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair, My Old Kentucky Home*, and hundreds more. His name was Stephen C. Foster. But he never intended his life to end on a cold wintry night in 1864 as a Bowery bum. How fervently we ought always to pray, "subject us not to the trial" or, as we know it, "Lead us not into temptation."

Our Lady at Medjugorje spent three weeks teaching the prayer group of young people there the "Lord's Prayer." St. Teresa of Avila wrote an entire book on it, as have other saints. Don't be deceived by its brevity. It can stand a lifetime of meditation.

St. Luke explains why God is disposed to hear our prayers: He is a friend, like the fellow in the parable seeking bread at midnight, and He is a Father who knows how to give good things to His children.

The parable and saying of Our Lord also illustrate how we ought to pray — with constancy and with confidence. Our Lady at Medjugorje is constantly reminding us to pray with our hearts. At church one Sunday, a person saw the guardian angels of everyone at Mass. They were writing down the prayers and petitions of each person. For those who prayed from the heart, their angels wrote down the petitions in gold. For those who prayed from habit, the angels wrote them down with a dry pen. For those who had unforgiveness in their hearts, their angels wrote with vinegar.



Photo: Frank Perrino

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