

Investigative book provides food for thought

By Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

John Cornwell's new book, *A Thief in the Night: The Death of Pope John Paul I* (Viking; fall publication), attributes the pope's sudden death on September 28, 1978, to incompetence and neglect.

According to the book, the cardinals who elected him were at fault for confusing piety with proficiency. He simply wasn't up to the job, and they should have known that.

The pope's two secretaries were at fault for ignoring obvious danger signals and for not taking the necessary steps to deal with them.

Cardinal Jean Villot, the Vatican Secretary of State, was at fault for imposing too much, too soon, on a clearly frail and be-

wildered man.

The pope's doctors, both in Venice and in the Vatican, were at fault for not seeing to the prompt transfer of his medical records and to continuity in care.

"It is an extraordinary irony," Cornwell writes, "that for nine hours through the night of 29-30 September six top specialists slaved over the Pope's corpse to preserve its appearance for protracted funeral poms, and yet not one doctor can own to have been responsible for his health during the last few days of his life when he was seriously ill and might well have been saved by timely treatment" (p.266).

But more than these failures alone, the system itself was at fault, Cornwell's book demonstrates.

One of the Vatican's consummate in-

siders, Archbishop Paul Marcinkus, former head of the Vatican Bank and one of the principal figures in this whole sorry episode, spoke with remarkable candor.

"If you can't find charity here in the Vatican, where will you find it? ... I don't want to work for J. Edgar Hoover, pick up dirt — pass it on ...

"You can get caught up in this exaggerated bureaucracy where all the bad elements of being a person can come out.

"This is a village, excuse me if I say this, a village of washerwomen. You know, they get down in the river, wash clothes, punch 'em, dance on 'em, squeezing all the old dirt out.

"In normal life," Archbishop Marcinkus continued, "people get away and have other interests, but here — what else is

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there to talk about?" (p.108).

And yet, although the new pope's poor health and personal sense of inadequacy were common knowledge throughout the "village of washerwomen," no one did anything about it.

The whole place, Cornwell was told, "floats on a flood of brilliant bitchery."

"At the same time," he observed, "nobody is responsible; there is a pervasive sense of pusillanimity, a reluctance to speak out and take responsibility, a meanness of spirit" (p.266).

When the author asked scores of Vatican personnel why nothing was done to help the pope, he was told again and again that you can't tell a pope what to do. It's always for him to decide what he wants.

"How was it," Cornwell asks, "that this community of people, the majority of them dedicated to a life of religion at the centre of Christendom, could fail to extend a helping hand to a man who was so clearly suffering?" (p.267).

"The denizens of the Vatican," he continued, "are all too conscious of their foibles. They are all too aware of the dismay they cause outsiders ... But it was precisely the combination of those shortcomings that proved as deadly for John Paul as if the gentlemen in the Vatican had collectively plotted to put digitalis in his coffee."

The conclave had chosen a holy, pastoral pope, a man of prayer, "but the Vatican had refused to accommodate itself to the challenge or the opportunity.

"They regarded him with condescension, and Villot callously piled on the mountain of paper work.

"Then they began to be affronted, even scandalized; sharp tongues wagged when he pointed to himself and said: 'Pity this poor Christ!'"

The comment of one Vatican official, Cornwell reports, was typical of many he heard: "The Holy Spirit did a good job: relieving us of him before he did too much damage" (p.268).

"This alienation within the Vatican," the author concludes, "has much to do, it seems to me, with a continuous attempt, despite the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, to patch up the old defences against the perceived profanations of the world: a hankering after a fortress mentality, a retreat into a realm of private reference, of 'pietistic' preoccupation with sacral trivialities ...

"My quest convinced me that the Vatican itself has not come to terms with the Christian challenge of bringing down the wall of hostility between God and secular society ...

"(T)he men who surrounded John Paul I appeared to attach more importance to the externals of Papal protocol than to genuine compassion and concern for his sufferings and inadequacies" (pp.277-278).

Read this book and ponder its meaning.

Transfiguration was preparation for trials to come

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's readings: (R3) Luke 9:28-36; (R1) Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; (R2) 2 Peter 1:16-19.

"Jesus took Peter, John and James" — the privileged three: Peter, who loved Jesus so much; John, whom Jesus loved so much; and James, the first to die for Jesus — "and went up unto a mountain to pray." Mountaintops were the best places to pray, away from the distractions of the world below.

Once again St. Luke alludes to the prayers of Jesus. Jesus was a man of prayer! Prayer is the path to glory, to transformation, to transfiguration. If you want to change your ways, your life, there is only one way: pray!

"While he was praying," the face and clothes of Jesus changed. The sun of His divinity shone through the cloud of His humanity. This was no miracle; the miracle was that the divinity had remained hidden all the other times of Jesus' earthly life.

"Suddenly two men" appeared. It is interesting to note that the exact same words are used for the two men who appeared at the resurrection (Luke 24:4) and at the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:10). Very likely,



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they too were Moses and Elijah. Moses represented the Law; Elijah, the Prophets; and Jesus between them represented Him who fulfilled both the Law and the Prophets, as He told the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27).

Both Moses and Elijah talked about Jesus' coming death. St. Luke uses the word *exodon*, for he saw Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension as an exodus, a passing over from this world to the next. Thus as the Exodus lasted 40 years, so Jesus stayed on earth 40 days after His resurrection before His final leave-taking, His ascension. This was the first purpose of the Transfiguration: to show that the death of Jesus was the will of God His Father.

At this moment, Peter, John and James fell into a deep sleep, just as they would in Gethsemane. In their dream/vision, they saw the glory of Jesus, and Peter exclaimed, "Lord, how good it is to be here. Let us set up three booths." Peter didn't know what he was saying. He was proba-

bly alluding to the joyful Feast of Booths. It was good to be there; but not to stay there. There was work still to be done.

Then a cloud came and overshadowed them, and the disciples grew fearful, for as good Jews, they knew that the cloud, like the Shechinah over the Ark, symbolized the presence of Almighty God. The voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son" — a confirmation of Peter's confession that Jesus was the Messiah, given just a few days before.

Then the voice said, "Listen to him." After Peter had confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus had told him that the Messiah was going to suffer and die and rise. Peter had remonstrated vehemently to that. He wouldn't listen to that at all. Now the voice of God said, "Listen to him." That was the second purpose of the Transfiguration: to confirm Peter's confession of faith in Jesus.

The third purpose of the Transfiguration was to strengthen the apostles for what lay ahead: Calvary. How short are the moments of ecstasy here on earth! Like meteors, they flash across our lives only to buoy us up over the Calvary periods, as the Transfiguration event did for Peter, John and James.

The fact that Moses and Elijah played a part in this event hints at the Communion of Saints. We should learn from them that heaven is deeply interested in what goes on here on earth.

Heaven and earth are like two mansions adjoining each other with a swinging door between them, always swinging. Jacob's ladder also symbolized the busy traffic constantly going on between heaven and earth. Since Jesus was still with the disciples, all they needed to do was to listen to Him. But once He ascended into heaven, then they were to realize that they too might enter into heavenly communion with God the Father and the saints as Jesus always did — through prayer!

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