

Papal firsts tell much about church

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

I recently spent some time writing an encyclopedia article on the popes and, as often happens in a research project, a lot of material finds its way onto the cutting-room floor, never to see the light of publication.

One is tempted to recycle the discarded data for use in some other forum, on the rationalization that nothing should go to waste. I could easily do something here on "papal firsts," for example, stringing together a series of interesting, but essentially insignificant, facts that would add up to a full column. No reader would be offended — nor enriched.

Thus, the first pope not to be listed as a saint was Liberius (352-66).

The first pope to abdicate was Pontian (230-35), after being arrested and exiled by an anti-Christian emperor. Many think that Celestine V (1294) was the first and only pope to resign his office.

The first pope to have been a monk was Gregory the Great (590-604).

The first pope to canonize a saint was John XV (985-96).

The first French pope was Silvester II (999-1003).

The first Franciscan pope was Nicholas IV (1288-92).

The first pope to be seen on television was Pius XII (1939-58).

The first pope to travel by air (as pope) was Paul VI (1963-78).



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

And so on.

More instructive, however, are the firsts that help us to distinguish the unchanging and the essential from the changeable and the accidental. Most of what pertains to the papacy falls under the latter category.

The first pope to be called "Vicar of Christ" was Gelasius I (492-96). That means that for more than four centuries the title "Vicar of Christ" was not accorded the pope at all (the more traditional title was "Vicar of Peter"), and it was not until the pontificate of Eugene III (1145-53) that it became identified exclusively with the pope.

The first (of many) popes to function as pope outside of Rome (and in the case of the Avignon popes, out-

side of Italy) was Eusebius (310).

The first pope to bestow the pallium (a symbol of office) on a bishop outside of Italy was Symmachus (498-514). Today we take it for granted that the pope personally bestows the pallium on all newly appointed archbishops.

After more than 500 years, the first pope to take a different name from his baptismal name was John II (533-55). He did so because his name was that of the pagan god Mercury.

The first pope to be "excommunicated" (by a synod of African bishops) was Vigilius (537-55). Needless to say, it didn't stick, but it reminds us that today's controversies within the church are child's play in comparison with those of earlier centuries.

The first pope to be assassinated was John VIII (872-82). He was poisoned by his staff members and then clubbed to death. Catholics who are quick to use the term "pope-bashing" to characterize good-faith criticism of papal or Vatican policies don't know how far from the mark they are.

On the other hand, the first — and, thank God, only — pope to have been implicated in the murder of his predecessor was Sergius III (904-11). He had Leo V strangled while in prison.

The first pope to have been a bishop of another diocese when elected to the papacy was Marinus I (882-84). This was in violation of the ancient canons (especially the Council of Nicea's canon 15) that prohibited bishops from being transferred from one

see to another. Once a man became a diocesan bishop, he was to be "married" to that diocese for life. It was not to be a stepping-stone to bigger and more prestigious sees.

The first (but not only) layman to be elected pope was Benedict VIII (1012-24).

The first pope to restrict papal elections to cardinals was Nicholas II (1058-61), which means that for more than the first half of the church's history popes were chosen by methods other than the one in use today. Those who argue in favor of broadening the electoral base to include more than cardinals have history on their side.

The first pope to establish the Roman Curia was Urban II (1088-89) — reminding us that the Catholic Church also got along for more than half its history without benefit of a powerful and sometimes intrusive Vatican bureaucracy.

The first pope to wear white was Innocent V (1276), who was also the first Dominican pope. That explains why he wore white, the color of the Dominican habit. Subsequent popes simply adopted the white cassock as their customary papal dress.

Of course, it could have been otherwise, but so could many other aspects of the papacy be otherwise than they are today, including even the power to appoint all bishops.

"History," the late Pope John XXIII once said, "is the great teacher of life." It also teaches us a lot about the church.

Thought of a good bumper sticker lately?

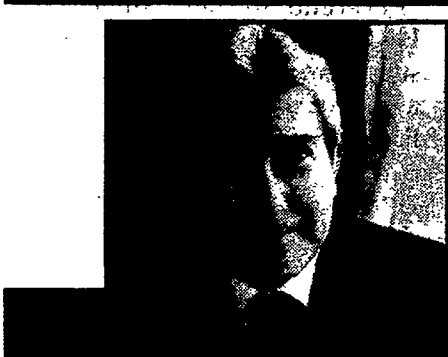
By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

I need your help on an assignment my spiritual director has given me. He wants me to summarize the spirituality of adult lay people on a series of bumper stickers.

His point (I think) is that there is a unique spiritual dimension to be found in the ordinary activities of the laity's daily life, but that most of us are not aware of (or at least are not able to name) it.

Traditional spirituality, on the other hand, has developed a lot more language to describe itself. "A Spirituality of Silence, Solitude, and Surrender," for example, pretty much sums up the contemplative way of finding God. "Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience," accurately describes the spiritual disciplines of most vowed religious.

What phrase, though, captures the spirituality of married couples? How about "Fidelity, Sexuality, Mutuality"



FAITH AND WORK

or "Marriage: The Spirituality of Never Deciding Anything without Checking First?" "Marriage Means Never Having to Say Goodbye" has a nice transcendental ring to it.

For parents, spirituality might be

summarized as "Experiencing the Limitless Power and Responsibility of God." Less grandiose might be "Become a Parent — Lose Your Own Life in Order to Gain It."

Single adults have their own spirituality: "We May Be Single, but We're Never Alone" or "Jesus Chose to Be 'The Single Life: A Special Way of Living for Others'?"

What bumper sticker might describe the spirituality to be found in our daily work? "Human Work: God's Preferred Method for Finishing Creation" or "Productivity, Creativity, Accountability" or even "The Sweat of Your Brow Can Taste So Sweet" are possible contenders.

For the laity's community and civic involvement, we might say: "The Kingdom of God Is a Participatory Democracy" or simply "Christians Make Loving Neighbors." What do you think of this one: "God and Politics Don't Mix ... They Merge."

There is also a spirituality attached

to lay involvement in church. "The Church Would Look Pretty Ridiculous without Us," as St. Thomas More is reputed to have said. The old saying that the laity should "Pray, Pay, and Obey" might become "Pray, Stay, and Give the OK" or, better yet, "We'll Pay if the Priests Stay and We All Obey (Each Other)." A more serious one might be "The Church Is My Campaign Headquarters" or "Church: A Community of Interdependence."

We could possibly sum up the spirituality of the laity with "Finding the Extraordinary in the Ordinary" or "A Spirituality for the End-Users of the Christian Faith."

I am serious about needing your help on this project. If you've got a bumper sticker that you think sums up a spirituality for lay people, send it to me c/o ACTA Publications, 4848 N. Clark Street, Chicago, Ill. 60640. (Include your name and address so I can give you the credit — or blame.)

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