

When a pope dies, we make another

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

There's an old saying that the only time one knows the true state of a pope's health is when he dies.

Keeping the public in the dark or misleading them with false information or outright denials about such an important matter, however, is not peculiar to Vatican officials. The American people, for example, were never fully informed of the physical condition of Presidents Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, or John F. Kennedy until after their deaths.

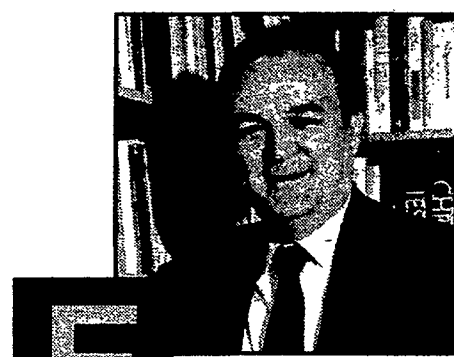
To be sure, we expect a much higher standard of truthfulness from the church, but that is to forget that it is as much a human institution as it is divine.

There is another old Roman saying that when a pope dies, we make another.

That maxim conveys a realism that has been part of the Roman ecclesiastical culture for centuries. Popes come and go; the papacy and the church remain.

But there is a ritual that many Catholics feel obliged to observe in the final stage of any given pontificate. They speak as if the reigning pope will never die, and, should death occur, as if it might even deprive the church of something essential to its institutional well-being and identity.

As of 1994, however, there have already been more than 260 popes, which means that over 260 of them have died — from St. Peter to John



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Paul I. And yet the papacy and the church have survived.

What, then, is to be said of the admonition, found in Pope Paul VI's 1975 constitution "On the Election of the Roman Pontiff," against the discussion of a successor while the pope still lives?

That's another matter entirely. It arises not from a misguided sense of loyalty or piety, but from the well-springs of Roman realism.

The prohibition is based on a tradition that goes back many centuries, at least to the pontificate of Felix IV (526-530).

As his death approached, the pope gathered around his sickbed his key supporters from among the local clergy and the Roman senate, and formally instructed them to elect his

archdeacon Boniface as his successor. He even-handed Boniface his pallium — the woolen vestment worn around the neck as the sign of his pastoral office, on condition that it be returned if he recovered.

When the pope's instruction was published in Rome, the majority of the senate challenged the action as unconstitutional and passed an edict forbidding any discussion of a pope's successor during his lifetime.

As it happened, Pope Felix eventually had his way. Although the deacon Dioscorus was chosen by a large majority after the pope's death, a minority withdrew to a hall of the Lateran basilica and elected Boniface (who took the name Boniface II), thereby precipitating a schism.

But Dioscorus died suddenly only 22 days after his election. The now-leaderless clergy of Rome, after some initial hesitation, accepted Boniface as pope.

Some 77 years later, a third Pope Boniface, perhaps recalling how his own election had been marked by politicking and vote-trading between factions, held a synod to regulate papal elections. The synod forbade, under pain of excommunication, all discussion of a papal successor during the reigning pope's lifetime and until three days after his death.

Boniface III's reform did not put an end to politics in papal elections, but it did drive underground speculation among cardinal-electors about papal succession before a reigning pope had died.

To be sure, Romans have always found multiple ways of getting around laws without directly violating them, and this one has been no exception. Instead of discussing the names of possible candidates, cardinal-electors exchange views about the "qualities" they should look for in a successor.

In the aftermath of Pope John Paul II's abrupt "postponement" of a long-planned trip to the United States this month to speak at the United Nations and then to make highly visible pastoral visits in New York, Newark, and Baltimore, there is an end-of-the-regime syndrome now at work in the church.

Catholics not given to the ritual mentioned above have begun speculating in earnest about the next pontificate. Cardinal-electors, in the meantime, remain bound by the prohibition, but undoubtedly the matter is uppermost in their minds.

Various discreet forms of communication will continue until the bells of St. Peter's toll their mournful news.

Regarding the "qualities" needed in the next pope, one conservative American cardinal is reported to have said privately that, while Pope John Paul II has been a great pope, the next pope will have to be someone who can bring the church together.

If that cardinal's opinion is at all reflective of the thinking of other conservative cardinal-electors from around the world, there will be no carbon-copy successor as so many now expect — either out of hope or out of fear.

Seize the present moment!

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 10:46-52; (R1) Jeremiah 31:7-9; (R2) Hebrews 5:1-6.

The cure of the blind beggar Bartimaeus brings to a conclusion Mark's orderly account of Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem.

On that journey, Jesus predicted His passion three times. Three times, yet the disciples completely misread Him; they were blinder than Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus' cure was a parable of action. As Jesus gave sight to Bartimaeus, so He would remove the scales from the apostles' eyes in Jerusalem. There, they would see the Messiah suffer and their eyes would be opened. "If I be lifted up, I shall draw all to myself."

Jericho was the last stop for Jesus before reaching Jerusalem. Beggars frequently gathered in Jericho, located 15 miles northeast of the city, because pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for the great feasts had to pass through Jericho. Pilgrims were generally God-fearing people, and thus likely to be generous.

Bartimaeus sat at the gates of Jeri-



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

cho. When he heard Jesus was passing by, he called out, "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me." People tried to silence him. Someone said: "There is never a knock at heaven's gate that is not heard in hell, and all the devils come out to silence it."

Bartimaeus would not be silenced and Jesus cured him. Later, Bartimaeus must have become a renowned Christian, for his name is remembered.

I'd like to make a few reflections about Bartimaeus.

St. Augustine once wrote that he did not fear Jesus' coming, only His passing by, since He might never come that way again. Actually, Jesus' journey to Jericho was His last. He never did come that way again. If Bartimaeus had not seized the opportunity, he might never have been cured.

Horace said "Carpe diem" — "Seize the present moment." Now is the acceptable time. Opportunity knocks but once.

*I have only just a minute,
Just sixty seconds in it,
Forced upon me, can't refuse it,
Didn't seek it, didn't choose it.
I must suffer if I lose it,
Give account if I abuse it,
Just a tiny little minute,
But eternity is in it!*

The crowd tried to hush Bartimaeus much like the way the world tends to shun the miserable and needy. But Jesus told us to be compassionate. Blessed are the merciful, they shall obtain mercy.

When Jesus called Bartimaeus, he let nothing hinder him from going to Jesus. Bartimaeus was a beggar; he had only a tattered cloak. Yet he threw

that away to get to Jesus.

Once a child shoved his hand into the narrow opening of an expensive Chinese vase, but then he was not able to pull it out. No matter how hard they pulled, his frantic parents could not get his hand out either. The child's crying drove the parents to make a hard decision: to smash the precious vase. It turned out that the child was clutching a penny he had seen in the bottom of the vase, and then would not let go of it to extract his hand.

Often we are just as blind. For the sake of a wretched penny in our grasp that we want to keep, we do not hesitate to smash the God's temple that we are. For a minute's mirth we forfeit eternity; for one grape, we destroy the vine.

One thing about Bartimaeus was that he knew he was blind; and he knew what he wanted: "I want to see;" and he knew where to go to obtain vision.

Each time I genuflect before the Blessed Sacrament, I use Bartimaeus' words, "Domine, ut videam" ("Lord, may I see!"). I want to see why I'm here; where I am going; and how am I to get there.

Jesus is the Way, go to Him.

"We must contemplate the beauty of the Father without ceasing and adorn our own souls accordingly."

St. Gregory of Nyssa

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