

## Don't look for a Pope Formosus II

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Pope John XXIII, an historian by training, was fond of saying that history is the great teacher of life. Unfortunately, it is a teacher with too few students ready and willing to listen and to learn from it.

Many younger African-Americans, for example, have no personal knowledge of the contributions to human rights made by Martin Luther King Jr., Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, and so many others who suffered verbal abuse, physical violence, and imprisonment in the cause of freedom and justice.

The could undoubtedly be said of many younger women with regard to the pioneers of the women's liberation movement, the extraordinary gains they achieved against overwhelming odds, and the personal price they paid in achieving those gains.

And the same could also be said of younger Catholics who have little or no idea of the difficulties and opposition faced by pre-Vatican II Catholic reformers — of the liturgy, of religious orders, of theological and biblical scholarship.

The limitations of historical knowledge also color many Catholics' understanding of the papacy. We think that because the popes of our lifetimes — from Pius XI to John Paul II — were respected and even revered figures, that all, or at least the overwhelming majority of popes, enjoyed similarly positive public images.



### ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Anyone even remotely familiar with the history of the popes knows that not to be the case. Which is not to say that we should become cynical about the matter. On the contrary, the many bleak chapters in papal history should make us even more appreciative of the modern popes like John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II.

If anyone, however, still needs a healthy dose of historical reality to bring their otherwise romantic views of the papacy down to earth, one can find no better, more vivid example than the unbelievably tragic figure of Formosus, pope from 891-896.

Historians tell us that he was a gifted and well educated man who had a brilliant missionary career in Bulgaria, and as a papal legate in France and Germany. As bishop of Porto, Italy, he was a consecrator of Pope Stephen

V un 885.

Although already over 75, he was elected as Stephen's successor more than six years later. But in order to become the bishop of Rome, he had to leave Porto diocese.

The idea of transferring from one diocese to another was not yet customary, as it is today, and that fact would later be used against Formosus in a heretofore unimaginable way.

As pope he strengthened the church in England and north Germany and maintained friendly relations with Constantinople, the major see of Eastern Catholicism. Unfortunately, he became entangled in political conflicts closer to home — entanglements that would plague him even beyond the grave.

Formosus died after only four and a half years in office, but his troubles were only beginning!

Nine months after his death, his decaying corpse was exhumed, propped up on a throne in full pontifical vestments, and then solemnly arraigned in a mock trial (known as the "cadaver synod") presided over by none other than Stephen VI. A deacon stood by Formosus's corpse, answering the charges on the dead pope's behalf.

Formosus was found guilty of perjury, of having coveted the papal throne, and of having violated the canons of the church that forbade the transfer of bishops from one diocese to another.

All of his acts and ordinations as pope were declared null and void. The three fingers of his right hand which

he had used to swear and to bless were hacked off, and his body was reburied in a common grave.

The body was then dug up a second time and flung into the Tiber River. A hermit found the corpse and reburied it.

A more sympathetic successor in the Petrine office, Pope Theodore II, ordered Formosus's body dug up a third time, had it reclothed in pontifical vestments, and then reburied — a fourth time — in its original grave in St. Peter's. He also nullified Pope Stephen VI's order and declared that all of Formosus's ordinations had been valid.

But another successor, Pope Sergius III, reversed Pope Theodore's action and declared once again that all of Formosus's ordinations had been invalid. The church was thrown into total confusion because Pope Formosus had ordained many bishops and they, in turn, had ordained many more priests, some of whom later became bishops themselves.

If history is "the greatest teacher of life," we should have something to learn from the story of Pope Formosus and the grotesque way he was treated by two later popes.

If it is always the case that the successor of Peter guarantees a sure path to unity and truth, what is to be said of this situation? After all, Popes Stephen VI and Sergius III were as much "successors of Peter" as Pope John Paul II is.

Footnote: There has never been a Pope Formosus II. Is anyone surprised?

## Downsizing job may increase satisfaction

By Gregory Pierce  
Columnist

Loryn Paxton has worked in public relations for an opera company and was the founder of a children's museum. She now works for the bakery department at her neighborhood supermarket.

In a recent essay in *The Chicago Tribune* titled, "Forgoing the American Dream," Paxton reflected on the meaning of her voluntary change in careers.

In her previous jobs, she writes, "I'd drag home, obsessing about responsibility, too tired to cook, too frazzled to listen to my husband or help my daughter with homework. My family depends on my income, but this time, before looking for work, I thought about what I wanted, not what I was qualified for. What I wanted was a pleasant office, minimal responsibili-



### FAITH AND WORK

ties, no commute and no dressing for success. A job that paid enough to cover our health insurance. A no-brainer."

How many people in professional or white-collar occupations have had this same fantasy but failed to pursue it? "Middle-class folks with college educations are expected to perform to their potential," Paxton notes.

This attempt to live up to expectations, however, is not always the surest path to happiness. Michael Jordan, for example, who was at the absolute pinnacle of his profession as a basketball player, was reportedly not happy. He quit to become a low-paid, mediocre, minor-league baseball player.

Certainly it is easier to make such a decision when, like Jordan, you have enough money to buy a brand new, air-conditioned bus to transport yourself and your teammates from game to game. Jordan knows, too, that he could return to his former job anytime he tires of his newly chosen career.

Would he be as happy digging ditches or working alongside Loryn Paxton in a grocery store?

Still, for many people the decision to "downsize" their careers may truly be the smartest, most spiritual choice they can make — despite the obvious consequences in pay, prestige and power.

"We're not used to seeing educated friends replace ambitious jobs with low paying, menial ones," argues Paxton, "but it's an alternative that many are now considering and choosing."

"Texture is the thing with bread, as novelist Henry Miller pointed out," she writes, "but it's not what we're supposed to seek or appreciate in work. Yet the texture of my job makes other jobs taste like Wonderbread: characterless, bland, boring."

Perhaps other people would benefit from trading their "important" jobs for occupations they truly like.



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