

COLUMNISTS

If two popes reign, who holds sway?

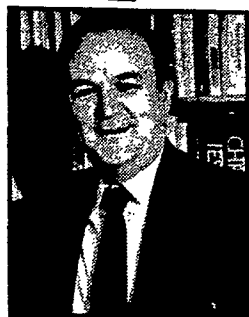
Ever since the definitions of papal primacy and papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council in 1870, many Catholics have come to believe that it is the pope who has the authority and responsibility to decide what it means to be a Catholic and to determine the rules of Catholic behavior.

According to this view, the papacy is the advantage Catholics enjoy over Protestants and others. When there is a doubt or dispute about what we are to believe or to do to be saved, Catholics have a pope to resolve doubts and settle disputes. He speaks and acts for Jesus, whose vicar he is, and for Peter, whose successor he is.

Even if one were to take this as an accurate description of papal authority, it is evident that such a system can only work if the church always knows who the pope is.

"Knowing who the pope is — that's the easy part," some Catholics might retort. "What's difficult is accepting his teachings and rules when they go against the human grain."

But it has not always been easy to determine the identity of the pope. Indeed, there have been 39 antipopes in the history of the church, that is, individuals who claimed title to the chair of Peter while someone else was sitting on it. During the Great Western Schism (1378-1417), for example, there were at first two, and then



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

three, simultaneous claimants.

"Well, these antipopes were surely easy to distinguish from the real popes," one might say. "They must have been perfectly horrible people seeking only to disrupt the church and confuse the faithful."

Not quite. The first antipope was a saint, Holiytus (217-235), who died in exile with the pope he had challenged, Pontian.

In several instances the church still can't make up its mind about who was the antipope and who was the legitimate pope. The 1997 *Catholic Almanac*, which contains the official Vatican list of popes, includes several notations that should give pause to any papal purist.

It concedes, for example, that confusion exists concerning the legitimacy of the pontificates of Leo VIII and Benedict V in 963-966. If the reigning pope, John XII,

was validly deposed by a Roman council in 963, then Leo VIII is a legitimate pope and Benedict V is an antipope. If the deposition was invalid, then Leo VIII is an antipope and Benedict V is a legitimate pope. The Vatican doesn't decide. It leaves both Leo and Benedict on the list.

Distinguishing between legitimate popes and antipopes is something the church has had to do, off and on, for more than 12 centuries. The first antipope (Holiytus) began his presumptive pontificate in 217. The last of the antipopes (Felix V) did not finally relinquish his claim to the papacy until 1449.

The mystifying cases, however, are those which involve not antipopes but what I would call "co-popes," that is, popes considered legitimate by the Vatican, but whose terms of office overlap so that, according to the Vatican's official list, there would have been two popes occupying the chair of Peter at the same time.

There are two clear instances in papal history. The first involves Popes Silverius and Vigilius. Silverius was forcibly deposed from office by the imperial general in March 537. Under pressure, Silverius formally abdicated on Nov. 11.

Meanwhile, Vigilius accepted election to the papacy on March 29 — soon after the imperial general's deposition of Sil-

verius, but more than seven months before Silverius resigned.

According to the Vatican's official list, Silverius and Vigilius occupied the chair of Peter together between March 29 and Nov. 11, 537. Neither is regarded as an antipope. Therefore, they must somehow have been "co-popes."

About a century later we find the same thing happening again. Martin I was forced into exile in June 653. Eugenius I was elected pope on Aug. 10 of the following year, while Martin was still alive.

According to the Vatican's official list, Eugenius' pontificate began with his election on Aug. 10, 654, and Martin's ended on the day he died, Sept. 16, 655. Thus, the church had two "co-popes" for a period of one year, one month, and six days.

For Catholics living during those two periods, who was the successor of Peter? To whom would they turn for true doctrine and right discipline?

The point is: It really didn't make that much difference. The church survived in spite of the confusion, because it is Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, not the pope or any other officials, who are the ultimate guarantors of its faith, witness and unity.

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Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Faith thrives on little acts

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 3:14-21. (R1) 2 Chronicles 36:14-17, 19-23. (R2) Ephesians 2:4-10.

A boy's pet iguana had been scared up a tree by a dog. It fell from the tree into a swimming pool. A woman was called from the Humane Society. She dove into the pool and emerged with the pet's limp body. She didn't want to tell the boy his iguana had died. So she used CPR and put her lips to the iguana's and resuscitated it.

Imagine giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to an ugly iguana. Yet we were like that ugly iguana. While we were unbecomingly, while we were sleazy, while we were unworthy, God reached out with love and forgiveness and eternal life. St. Paul says that "by God's favor we were saved. Salvation is not your own doing, it is God's gift."

And why did God so grace us? Again Paul says, "We are truly his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to lead the life of good deeds which God prepared for us in advance."

There are two types of Catholics: the extrinsically religious and the intrinsically religious.

The extrinsically religious are the people who use religion. Going to church is



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

useful to boost one's status, to win friends, gain power and have influence. They use religion to sanction their own formula for living. They turn to God, but they don't turn away from self. Religion is primarily a shield for self-centeredness.

The intrinsically religious are usually the smaller group in the church. Their love for God is a hunger for and a commitment to oneness with God and with all others. They are not judgmental. They practice what they preach and are humble. They do not try to use God; instead, they are used by God. Because God is rich in mercy to them, they try to live out their gratitude in service to others.

And that service should be to those

closest to them. Charity, we say, begins at home. But sometimes Christians miss that point. Leo Tolstoy, a Christian of strong principles, freed his serfs so that they would no longer live in grinding poverty.

But after he died, his wife, Sonya, wrote: "There is so little genuine warmth about him.... His biographies will tell of how he helped the laborers to carry buckets of water, but no one will ever know that he never gave his wife a rest and never — in all these thirty-two years — gave his child a drink of water or spent five minutes by his bedside to give me a chance to rest a little from all my labors."

Tolstoy was blind to the needs of those closest to him.

"Do not imagine," says Mother Teresa, "that love to be true must be extraordinary.... See how a lamp burns, by the continual consumption of the little drops of oil. If there are no more of these drops in the lamp, there will be no light, and the Bridegroom has a right to say: 'I do not know you.'"

"My children, what are these drops of oil in our lamps? They are the little things of everyday life: fidelity, punctuality, little words of kindness, just a little thought for

others, those little acts of silence; of look and thought, of word and deed. These are the very drops of love that make our religious life burn with so much light.

"Do not search for Jesus in far off lands," she concludes. "He is not there. He is in you, next to you. Just keep the lamp burning and you will always see him."

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

- Monday, March 10**
Isaiah 65:17-21; John 4:45-54
- Tuesday, March 11**
Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12; John 1:3, 5-16
- Wednesday, March 12**
Isaiah 49:8-15; John 5:17-30
- Thursday, March 13**
Exodus 32:7-14; John 5:31-47
- Friday, March 14**
Wisdom 2:1, 12-22;
John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30
- Saturday, March 15**
Jeremiah 11:18-20; John 7:40-53

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