

History reveals varied beliefs about popes

In his memorable opening address to the Second Vatican Council, on Oct. 11, 1962, Pope John XXIII criticized many of his own curial officials, though not by name, for their hand-wringing pessimism about the state of the world and the church.

"They can see nothing but prevarication and ruin," he said of them. "They behave as though they had learned nothing from history, which is, nonetheless, the teacher of life."

John XXIII had been himself an historian before entering the church's diplomatic service in the 1920s and later being elected pope in 1958. It was his well-honed historical perspective that accounts, perhaps more than anything else, for his obvious spirit of confidence and tranquility in the face of rapid and enormous change, both in society and in the church.

He was clearly not one of those Catholics who assumed that the church of his parents and grandparents was exactly the same church that Jesus himself had established, down to the last institutional detail. He knew too much history to fall into that common trap.

John XXIII could always tell the difference between what is essential and what is accidental. Indeed, he made this very point in that celebrated opening address: "The substance of the ancient doctrine is



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another."

Nowhere is this lack of a sense of history more obvious these days than in the erroneous beliefs that many Catholics continue to harbor about the office of the pope.

For such Catholics, there is nothing more distinctively "Catholic" about Catholicism than the papacy itself. To be a Catholic is to "believe in" the pope. To be a "good" Catholic is to be utterly and uncritically loyal to the pope. (Of course, that has always depended on "who" the pope happened to be.)

But there are numerous facts about the papacy (not just theories or theological interpretations) that challenge our unhistorical assumptions about the office itself.

For example, the title "pope" was not even applied exclusively to the bishop of

Rome until 1073. Before that, "papa" (Italian, "father") was used of any bishop in the West, while the East applied it to priests as well.

"Vicar of Christ" is another case in point. Here again we assume that it applies exclusively to the pope, as if he alone has some special identification with Christ, as his alter ego on earth. But vicar of Christ, too, was applied to every bishop until the pontificate of Eugenius III (1145-53), when the title was reserved to the bishop of Rome.

Historically and theologically, the more accurate title for the pope is vicar of Peter. It was commonly employed by the bishops of Rome from the end of the fourth century until the middle of the 12th — a period of nearly 800 years!

Without a sense of history we may be tempted to assume as well that the election of popes was always done by cardinals, when, in fact, through the entire first millennium of the church's existence, bishops of Rome were elected by the local clergy and laity. To be sure, the Eastern emperors exercised an undue influence for about 170 of those years by requiring their permission before a newly elected pope could be consecrated, but, even then, the election itself remained in the hands of the priests and people of Rome.

We might also think that only bishops

can be elected pope. But until the end of the ninth century, not one bishop was elected pope. Every newly elected pope until then had been either a priest (presbyter) or a deacon (and in one case, a subdeacon) of the Diocese of Rome.

In 882 Marinus I was elected, although he was already the bishop of Caere (now Cerveteri). Why was this election so unprecedented? Because the First Council of Nicaea (325), the same council that defined the divinity of Christ, had laid down a rule (canon 15) that prohibited the transfer of any bishop from one diocese to another.

There was a good reason for this rule. The relationship of a bishop to his diocese was seen as a marital one. It was considered just as unthinkable for a bishop to leave his diocese for a more prestigious one as it was for a husband to leave his wife for a younger or richer version.

If a pope was not expected to have been a bishop before being elected, neither did he already have to be in holy orders, whether as a priest or a deacon. In the late 10th and early 11th centuries three, and possibly four, laymen were elected.

Alas, they were not among the better popes of history.

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Lent can strengthen our dedication to Jesus' mission

Our observance of Lent today has evolved over history. History shows that early Christians entered into fasts of various lengths leading up to Easter. At times the fast was only three days; in Rome it was apparently first lengthened to three weeks. Gradually the pre-Easter fast became associated with the preparation and training of catechumens, who become full members of the church at the Easter Vigil service. As the practice of Lent evolved, its length and emphasis have shifted.

One of the most profound bases for Lent relates to our notion of the imitation of Christ. The image of Jesus spending 40 days in the desert leading up to his commitment to his mission at his baptism is a strong and attractive one for Christians. The idea of our entering into a period of fasting, prayer and almsgiving in imitation of him has been taken up by Christians from the earliest centuries.

Part of the reason for this is surely the intention we all have to imitate and follow Jesus. The Gospel stories of his life have never remained "just stories" among Christians. Rather, filled with concrete images of Jesus' sayings and deeds, these accounts have provided the basis for Christian activity from the very beginning. In fact, most Christians have found



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

a large part of their own self-understanding in the stories about disciples experiencing a "call" from Jesus to join him.

With part of our self-understanding deriving from understanding ourselves as disciples, we look for ways to "do as he did." Our observance of Lent is one example of how Jesus' life becomes the model for our own: Since he spent time entering into an extended period of fasting and prayer, we should, too.

Three interesting aspects of the notion of Christian discipleship might prove of benefit during Lent. The first is that the Christian account of becoming a disciple is different from other kinds of "disciplining" that arose in Jesus' time. We know, for example, that the Greek philosophers assembled schools of disciples. But in the

Greek schools, it was the student who chose the teacher. In the Gospel stories, it is Jesus who does the selecting.

In the Christian life we emphasize the commitment we should have to Christ and the church. Still, a profound aspect of our identity is that he chose us. Christians have never understood our call to be a kind of "optional" part of life that we can attend to as we get the time or as we feel like it. Quite the opposite: We are Christians because we are called by Christ himself and commissioned to help carry on his mission. We did not choose him: He chose us.

A second aspect of the call to discipleship in the Gospel stories is that there are some benefits that come from accepting "the call." As was the case with the original disciples, those who follow Jesus share his companionship. Disciples get to be in his company, to learn from him by attending to what he does and says. Disciples also earn the privilege of being in the company of others who strive to know him and carry on his mission.

Third, we learn from the Gospels that following Jesus makes demands on the disciples, and can bring them conflict and hardship. If we look closely, we find that the Gospel stories in which Jesus calls dis-

ciples are often surrounded by predictions of the cross, suffering or demands for serious renunciation. Being a follower of Jesus means that we share in his commitment to inaugurate God's kingdom on earth. Clearly, his own dedication to this cause in the face of rejection and resistance by those around him cost him his life. The Gospel stories clearly point out that like him, disciples have to be prepared to be faithful to their missions in spite of resistance, too.

For Jesus, 40 days in the desert prepared him for the commitment to mission that he assumed at his baptism. For those of us who share in his mission, the discipline and asceticism of Lent may help us to bring increased dedication and readiness to that mission. Awareness that we have been chosen by him lends some seriousness, I think, to our approach to Lent. Enjoyment of our "companionship" with him alerts us to part of the reward of our call to discipleship. And strengthening ourselves for the demands of mission can provide an important focus for whatever forms of asceticism we assume as we move through Lent.

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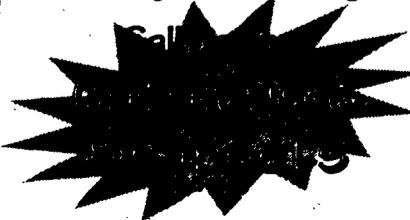


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