

COLUMNISTS

Not all pontiffs displayed high moral character

Questions about President Clinton's personal life continue to occupy the attention of the media and particularly of the many talking heads who appear nightly on television to dissect every new development in the case, however trivial.

Those with connections to the Republican Party or with a personal ax to grind against the president tend to be sympathetic to the efforts of the special prosecutor, Kenneth Starr; others with connections to the Democratic Party or working out of the inherent biases of defense attorneys think the process is out of control and that the country should be liberated from any further obsession with the president's sex life.

A comment one occasionally hears from those who are inclined to exculpate the president for his alleged private moral lapses is that we elected a president, not a pope. In other words, we expect our presidents to be effective political leaders; we don't expect them to be saints.

The comment is actually a marvelous tribute to the high moral quality and reputation of the church's modern popes, from Leo XIII (1878-1903) to John Paul II.

Although these popes have differed from one another in personality (consider the stark contrast between the austere and aristocratic Pius XII and the jovial,



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

grandfatherly John XXIII) and in pastoral outlook (compare the reactionary Pius X with his conciliatory successor, Benedict XV), no hint of moral corruption ever tainted their personal character. Liberal Catholics may have been appalled by Pius X's campaign against dissent in the church, but they could not question his personal integrity or sanctity. Indeed, he was canonized a saint in 1954.

At the same time, the comment that we elected a president, not a pope, is also incredibly naive. By the standards of history, President Clinton is more of a saint than a sinner in comparison with a number of previous pontiffs.

Stephen VI (896-897), for example, ordered the body of one of his predecessors, Formosus, to be exhumed from its grave, robed in full pontifical vestments, and put

on trial for alleged crimes against the church. Stephen was himself later deposed and strangled to death.

Sergius III (904-911) ordered the murder of his predecessor, Leo VI, and of the antipope Christopher, and reaffirmed the verdict of the notorious "cadaver synod" that condemned Pope Formosus.

John XII (955-964), elected at age 18, led one of the most immoral lives of any pope in history and died of a stroke, allegedly in the bed of a married woman.

Innocent IV (1243-1254) was the first pope to approve the use of torture in the Inquisition to extract confessions; he placed relatives in key church positions; and he considered church revenues to be for his own personal use.

Clement VI (1342-1352) lived like a worldly prince, spending most of his time and the church's money on personal luxuries, banquets and other festivities. He was shameless in his conferral of church offices and benefits on relatives and friends, and there were constant rumors about other aspects of his personal life.

Urban VI (1378-1389) had five cardinals who had been critical of him tortured and executed. His unstable, volatile and abusive behavior helped to precipitate the Great Western Schism that divided the church for nearly 40 years.

Callistus III (1455-1458) was a blatant nepotist and anti-Semite, and was so unpopular with the Roman people that, upon his death, they vented their wrath on the pope's fellow Catalans (Spain), who fled the city in terror.

Sixtus VI (1471-1484) reigned like a Renaissance prince. He established the Spanish Inquisition and appointed the notorious Torquemada as grand inquisitor. In order to replenish the papal treasury, he authorized the sale of indulgences.

Alexander VI (1492-1503) was, by the consensus of historians, the most notorious pope in history. Nepotism and unbridled sensuality were the hallmarks of his pontificate.

Julius II (1503-1513), depicted in the film, "The Agony and the Ecstasy," was elected pope through bribery and false promises and spent much of his time as pope engaged in military battles. He also paved the way for the Protestant Reformation by the sale of indulgences to raise money for the new St. Peter's Basilica.

One wonders if there were commentators who excused such papal failings by reminding everyone that the church had elected a pope, not a president.

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

Jesus offers forgiveness to the repentant

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 8:1-11. (R1) Isaiah 43:16-21. (R2) Philippians 3:8-14.

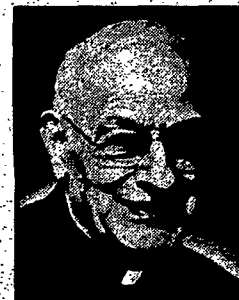
Our religion is one of hope. Hope is simply expecting to reach the supernatural goal of life by relying on God's promises to help. God is good and God is all-powerful, so he can fulfill his promises. Hope inspires us with great expectations. We end the Creed with "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

Hope, therefore, is always about the future, some future good to come — about something we don't yet have. What we already have, we don't hope for.

The student hopes to graduate. Athletes hope to win the game. The lottery ticket buyer hopes to win money. We all hope for a nice day tomorrow.

Isaiah says, "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; See, I am doing something new!"

When Isaiah wrote this, God's people had been in exile in Babylon for more than 50 years. Their city had been destroyed. Their temple had been razed to the ground. Their king was in chains. They themselves were in slavery. They had almost given up hope.



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

Into this hopeless situation God raised up a prophet who is called a Second-Isaiah. He wrote Chapters 40 to 55 of the book of Isaiah. These chapters are called the Book of Consolation. He recalled for the people God's great works in the exodus from Egypt under Moses: the parting of the Red Sea waters, the destruction of the mighty army of Pharaoh. He recalled this to give them hope. What God had done in the past, he can do again in the future.

Isaiah promises God's people that what he had done in the past, he was going to do for them in the future but in a greater way. He was going to give them a new exodus. The past one was done after plagues and bloodshed. This new exodus from Babylon would be a peaceful one. In fact Cyrus the Great would subsidize the

return of the Jews to their homeland and help them rebuild Jerusalem and their temple.

What God had done for his people in the Old Testament, he promised to do for his people in an even greater way in the New Testament. He had saved them from slavery in both exoduses. But in the New Testament he would save his people from the terrible slavery of sin.

Thus in the Gospel story an adulteress is brought to Jesus. There is something unjust about the situation. The Law ordered both the man and the woman to be stoned to death. The scribes and the Pharisees bring only the woman. They did what they did out of hatred of Jesus. They wanted to trap him: Moses said stone the adulterers; the Romans said no Jew can pass a sentence of death.

Jesus would not inflict pain on this poor woman. He doodled on the ground. When the scribes and Pharisees persisted, Jesus rose and said, "Let the man who has no sin cast a stone at her." After they had all slunk away, Jesus arose and spoke to the woman not words of condemnation, but of forgiveness. He did not gloss over her sin; he forgave it and exhorted repentance. "I do not condemn you. But from now on, avoid this sin."

This is the hope Jesus has brought us. No matter how red or numerous our sins may be, forgiveness is always offered us if only we use the confessional. Jesus still says, "If you fall and fall again and again, fear not! I do not condemn you. Only get up and try and try again and again."

All one need do is go to confession — the sacrament of hope.

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

Daily Readings

- Monday, March 30**
Daniel 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62, or 13:41-62; John 8:12-20
- Tuesday, March 31**
Numbers 21:4-9; John 8:21-30
- Wednesday, April 1**
Daniel 3:14-20, 91-92, 95; John 8:31-42
- Thursday, April 2**
Genesis 17:3-9; John 8:51-59
- Friday, April 3**
Jeremiah 20:10-13; John 10:31-42
- Saturday, April 4**
Ezekiel 37:21-28; John 11:45-56

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