

Speculation on next pope steps up

Now that the recent mid-term elections in the United States are behind us, all political eyes have turned toward the presidential election of 2000.

No one thinks it insensitive to the incumbent, Bill Clinton, to be speculating already about his successor. The U.S. Constitution limits the president to two four-year terms. Mr. Clinton will leave office in January 2001 — as a matter of law.

The same is not the case with the pope. To speculate about his successor is to speculate also about his death, since there have been only six cases in the entire history of the papacy in which popes have resigned. It is highly unlikely that John Paul II will ever resign, and certainly not before the new millennium.

The last pope to resign was Gregory XII, as part of an agreement to bring an end to the Great Western Schism (1378-1417), which had as many as three simultaneous claims to the Chair of Peter.

Therefore, if the normal way by which the papal office becomes vacant is through the death of the incumbent, speculation about his successor inevitably involves speculation about his death as well. It has always been thus.

As Pope John Paul II's health continues to deteriorate, the media have become more open and explicit about such



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

speculation. They seem especially enamored of the idea of a black pope (Cardinal Francis Arinze, a Nigerian, who holds a high-ranking Vatican post) or a Jewish pope (Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger of Paris, a convert to Catholicism during his teen years). In September the CBS program "60 Minutes" focused on both possibilities, as well as Cardinal Carlo Martini of Milan, who would be the first Jesuit pope. The *Wall Street Journal* followed in early November with a front-page profile of Cardinal Arinze as a likely successor to John Paul II.

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of John Paul II's election to the papacy, over 140 Catholic groups in 27 countries issued a statement in mid-October entitled "A Pope for the Time to Come." The statement reflects a pro-

gressive outlook, in keeping, it can be argued, with the teachings of Vatican II on the church as the People of God and the collegial (not subordinate) relationship of the bishops with the Bishop of Rome.

Released in the United States by Catholics Speak Out, a project of the Quixote Center in Hyattsville, Md., the statement is a response, in part, to an invitation from Pope John Paul II himself in his 1995 encyclical on ecumenism, *Ut unum sint* ("That they may be one"). Therein the pope acknowledged that, while the existence of the papacy is non-negotiable, the manner of its exercise is another matter entirely. Indeed, it must be "open to a new situation" (n. 95).

The content of "A Pope for the Time to Come" follows an approach favored in feminist writings, in which the church is viewed primarily as a "discipleship of equals." All of the baptized are "co-responsible for decision-making in the life of our church," the statement insists.

"We need to restore a church that values dialogue and justice in its internal life as well as its approach to the world. We need to reestablish a church that respects and celebrates our worldwide diversity, a church in which there is freedom to live our faith in different ways in different cultures."

The text goes on, and its profile of the next pope follows logically: a visionary, a respecter of consciences, a pastor who encourages theological freedom, a reconciler, a leader, a collaborator, a pioneer, an ecumenist, a brother to Jews, a student of religious traditions, a lover of the poor and the oppressed, a prophet, an environmentalist, and "a gentle soul with a sense of humor."

The statement was sent to every member of the College of Cardinals, each of whom is eligible to succeed to the office. One wonders how many could possibly fit such an ambitious profile.

Although entirely sympathetic with the statement's intent and spirit, I have one quibble. While it properly advocates a return to the centuries-old election of bishops by clergy and laity alike, it seems ambiguous about who should participate in the election of the pope.

As was the case for most of the First Christian Millennium, that is the business of the clergy and laity of the Diocese of Rome, not of the entire People of God. The pope, after all, is the Bishop of Rome, not the bishop of the whole church.

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What does Jesus want, religious fanatics?

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 3:1-12. (R1) Isaiah 11:1-10. (R2) Romans 15:4-9.

Like a triptych, the church uses three great figures to prepare us for the coming of Christ: the prophet Isaiah, St. John the Baptist and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Isaiah sums up the longing of God's people for the Messiah — a longing that should also burn in our hearts for the coming of Christ.

St. John the Baptist announces that penance, a change of heart, is needed to prepare for the coming of Christ.

The Immaculate Conception, which we celebrate Dec. 8, reveals what care our Father in heaven took to prepare a virgin soul for the coming of his Son.

The first reading contains Isaiah's famous Messianic prophecy. The first line of that prophecy is magnificent poetry: a fine example of alliteration. "A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse."

Some trees cut down to a stump have enough sap and enough grip of the earth that eventually a shoot will sprout from the stump and in due time the sprout will become once again a great tree.

At the time of Isaiah, Assyria had destroyed the 10 northern tribes of Israel. Judah alone remained. Isaiah tries to



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

console her by prophesying the coming of the Messiah.

However, Isaiah foretells he will not come until even the Judean monarchy has passed away, until the royal tree of David has been cut down to a stump. That was why Isaiah did not use the name of David, which connoted political power, majestic splendor and pomp; instead he used the name of David's father, Jesse, a name little known and obscure.

Joseph and Mary were both of the royal house of David. But Joseph was only a carpenter and Mary a housewife; in other words, the proud tree of David's line had been leveled to the ground — a mere stump of what it had been. The time was ripe for the Messiah.

From that stump a shoot shall sprout,

said Isaiah; that shoot was Jesus, the son of Mary. He would restore the Kingdom of David and of his kingdom there would be no end.

When this Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit came upon him, giving him his sevenfold gifts: wisdom and understanding, counsel and strength, knowledge and fear of the Lord, so that he could establish a kingdom built on justice. "Not by appearance shall he judge. Nor by hearsay shall he decide... Justice shall be the band around his waist."

The fruit of justice is peace. The motto of Pope Pius XII was *Pax opus justitiae* — "Peace the work of Justice." Natural enemies: lamb and wolf, goat and leopard, calf and lion, cow and bear, baby and cobra will be at peace. The sprout of Jesse will reconcile irreconcilables. "Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever."

Peace must be first with God. St. Paul says the other peace we must make is with our neighbors. "Accept one another," he urges, "as Christ accepted you."

I know some say, "To live up above with the saints that we love — that's glory! But to live here below with the saints that we know — ah, that's another story."

In a Peanuts comic strip, Lucy was say-

ing that Christmas is a time for kindness and good will, a time when we accept one another into our hearts and homes.

Charlie Brown asks, "Why just Christmas? Why can't we be kind and accepting and neighborly all through the year?"

Lucy glares at Charlie Brown and says, "What are you, some kind of a religious fanatic?"

Yes, that is what Jesus wants.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, December 7

Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 5:17-26

Tuesday, December 8

Genesis 3:9-15,20; Ephesians 1:3-6,11-12; Luke 1:26-38

Wednesday, December 9

Isaiah 40:25-31; Matthew 11:28-30

Thursday, December 10

Isaiah 41:13-20; Matthew 11:11-15

Friday, December 11

Isaiah 48:17-19; Matthew 11:16-19

Saturday, December 12

Zechariah 2:14-17 or Revelation 11:19,12:1-6,10; Luke 1:39-47

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