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Pope Clement I, model of imperial Rome

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

Readers may wonder why this column focuses some weeks on saints or popes rather than on ecclesiastical issues that are of particular interest to Catholics.

One reason is that saints and popes offer an opportunity to dip into history and draw lessons from it. I have found over the years that many readers react favorably when the column takes an historical turn.

This week I write about a saint or a pope -- better still, a pope who happens also to be a saint. That would be Clement of Rome, generally regarded as the leading figure, if not also the head, of the local church of Rome for some 10 years, that is, from about the year 91 until about the year 101.

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Clement is best known not for his sanctity (although he was a saint) nor for his pontificate (although he is considered to be one of the church's earliest popes), but for his authorship of a letter referred to as *I Clement*.

This letter was the most important first-century Christian document outside of the New Testament itself, and there were many in the ancient church who regarded the letter as if it were, in fact, part of the New Testament canon (or official list of New Testament writings).

Clement, however, was not really a pope in the modern sense of the word. The Christian community in Rome at the time was probably divided into a number of small house churches scattered throughout the city and its neighboring districts, each presided over by one or more presbyters (equivalent to parish

priests today).

There would have been no united and coordinated leadership within the city's Christian community at this time.

According to *The Shepherd of Hermas*, another ancient church document, Clement was a presbyter responsible for communicating with Christian communities in other cities and towns and probably also with dispensing aid where needed.

As such, he would have functioned as a kind of foreign minister of the Roman church rather than as its monarchical bishop, or pope, as we understand the office today.

Clement's letter was sent, unsolicited, around the year 96 to the church in Corinth, instructing that community to reinstate elders, or senior presbyters, who had been improperly deposed and to exile younger persons who had instigated the rebellion.

The form of Clement's intervention was modeled on that of imperial Rome in its relations with its outlying provinces. Thus, Clement sent three witnesses along with the letter to observe and report on efforts to restore peace in the Corinthian church.

His recommendation of exile was also patterned after imperial practice. In fact, the letter was full of praise for the Roman state and its military as models of obedience.

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Indeed, Clement seems to have found the imperial system of Rome to be applicable to the church itself, leading historians and theologians alike to the conclusion that the organizational structures of the early church, many of which survive to this day, owed more to imperial Rome than to Jesus himself.

Moreover, there is no historical evidence to support the belief that Clement died a martyr, or that he had been exiled to Crimea where he was said to have preached the gospel while doing forced labor in the mines, or that he was later drowned in the Black Sea with an anchor around his neck.

NCR e-mail alerts saints Cyril and Methodius claimed to have recovered Clement's relics along with Privacy by SafeSubscribe were taken to Rome and buried in the church of San Clemente, which, according to tradition, stands on the site of Clement's house. What's this? Clement is invoked in the Eucharistic Prayer between fellow popes, Cletus and Sixtus, and his feast day is traditionally celebrated on this coming Sunday, Nov. 23.

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