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The shortest pontificate and a heretical one

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

Many Catholics and media people -- at least those with enough interest to care -- believe that the late Pope John Paul I must have had the shortest pontificate of all time. Not so. John Paul I is generally regarded as having had the 11th shortest pontificate in all of papal history: 33 days.

On the other hand, the current 10th shortest pontificate (Benedict V, May 22-June 23, 964, or 32 days) may some day be stricken from the record books because his pontificate was canonically dubious. But John Paul I's 33 days in office will still be well behind the pack.

Actually, the shortest pontificate of all was that of Urban VII, who was elected on September 15, 1590, and who died 12 days later, before his coronation, on September 27.

Born Giovan Battista Castagna, he was the nephew of Cardinal Verallo. This blood relationship certainly did not hurt. He would serve as papal legate to France, archbishop of Rosanno (also known as Rozzano), governor in the Papal States, an active participant at the Council of Trent (1562-63), nuncio to Spain, consultor (later inquisitor general) to the Holy Office, and a cardinal-priest of San Marcello al Corso (1583).

When he was elected pope, many had great hopes that his would be a reformist but temperate pontificate. Although he had been in good health up to that point, he contracted malaria the night after his election and died soon thereafter. He was buried in the basilica of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome.

He was succeeded by Niccolò Sfondrati, with the assistance of the pro-Spanish cardinals and after a two-month conclave. Sfondrati took the name of the pope who had made him a cardinal, Gregory XIII. Unfortunately, he was one of the least popular and least successful of all the popes in history.

One could wonder about the subsequent history of the church had Urban VII lived and Gregory XIV never been elected, just as one could wonder what the years after John Paul I's election would have been like if *he* had lived and John Paul II had never been elected.

September was also the month in which one of three popes (Vigilius and Honorius I were the others) who fell into material (as opposed to formal, or knowing and deliberate) heresy died. Indeed, Liberius, elected on May 17, 352, was the first pope not to be listed among the saints and is generally regarded to have been a weak pope.

He first opposed the Arians' condemnation of St. Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373), the leading figure at the Council of Nicaea in 325, for which he was deposed from office by the Arian emperor Constantius and sent into harsh exile in Thrace.

Liberius eventually submitted and was readmitted to the Roman see, which by that time and with the support of the emperor had elected a second bishop, Felix II (d. 365), technically an antipope.

It is interesting to note that Damasus, Liberius' eventual successor in the papacy, was for a time in Felix's service as a deacon, in defiance of the oath taken by the Roman clergy not to recognize anyone else as the Bishop of Rome while Liberius was still alive.

The Roman public, however, never accepted Felix as their bishop, and clamored for the return of Liberius. The emperor, under popular pressure, allowed Liberius to go back to Rome, but on the condition that he jointly rule with Felix.

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Felix, however, retreated to the suburbs of Rome in the face of a potential riot, but it was only after the death of Constantius in 361 that Liberius returned to orthodoxy and made an effort to restore the Nicene faith to the universal church.

He published a decree voiding the decisions of the pro-Arian Synod of Rimini (359), at which the Western bishops had been bullied into accepting an Arian creed.

At the same time, Liberius urged his fellow Italian bishops to reestablish communion with those bishops who had embraced the Rimini decisions, on condition that they now accept the Nicene Creed. He did the same for Eastern bishops four years later.

Liberius was also the builder of the huge Liberian Basilica, which was transformed in the fifth century to the major basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore (St. Mary Major), which still stands today as one of the four major basilicas of Rome (along with St. Peter's, St. John Lateran, and St. Paul's Outside the Walls).

Liberius, however, has usually been remembered as a betrayer of the faith and his name was even invoked by opponents of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council (1870).

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