

Pope John Paul II

Seven popes have died in my lifetime but none have received the praise that John Paul II has been given. We can all feel with those individuals who mourn his loss as the head of their church. The media are singing his praises. Political leaders from around the world recognize his contribution to world peace, human freedom, moral definitions, and the respect for life. Kind words are being expressed by Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist religious leaders. He was a man of courage and conviction. The Roman Catholic Church is receiving much good publicity. There is talk of him being quickly elevated to sainthood.

There is a wide difference in the Christianity he promoted and what I and millions of others believe, but I am glad he has tried to brighten its image in our modern world. Too many ugly images have been created through misrepresentation, ignorance, and hypocrisy. There are too many who are intent on leading and legislating us into a godless, secular society, so it is important that we see Christ's way in its favorable light. That can benefit all our churches.

Out of respect for the dead and his mourners, comments are more generous and politically correct for a while. How long will that prevail, even among all Catholics? Will there be no outcry against his forbidding contraception, against his opposition of abortion, against his refusal to admit women to the priesthood, and against his continued demand for a celibate priesthood? Will the integrity of his papacy be questioned because he did not deal decisively years ago with the problem of pedophiles and practicing homosexuals so common in the priesthood? As the head of his church he surely must have known about them.

Because it was the politically correct thing to do, political leaders from around the world crowded Rome. Millions of his admirers who could have more conveniently seen him while he was alive converged on Rome stumbling over each other for a glimpse at his corpse as the media gave so much attention. It became "the thing" to do, and that was their privilege.

What I am writing here is not an effort to defame John Paul II, but it is to protest the claims of the papacy itself, regardless of the man who holds that office. I was living twenty miles from the city limits of San Antonio when he visited there. I had no interest in seeing a man who, at his coronation, is pronounced to be "The Father of Princes and Kings, Ruler of the World, and Vicar of Jesus Christ." His tiara, or triple crown, symbolizing those three claimed offices is made of cloth of gold and is bejeweled with 252 pearls, 229 diamonds, 32 rubies, 19 emeralds, and 11 sapphires unless these things have been updated in recent times.

No one outside our government has any civil authority over me. I recognize no one as a vicar (one serving as a substitute or agent, as in "*vice-president*") of Christ having authority over my soul. No man is a mediator between me and God. Jesus has filled that capacity and has brought me to God so that there is no alienation requiring further reconciliation. I am a priest serving under the one High Priest, Jesus Christ.

A pope's temporal title is "Sovereign of the State of Vatican City." A pope's spiritual titles are "Bishop of Rome, Vicar of Jesus Christ, Successor of St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Patriarch of the West, Primate of Italy, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province." The claim of tracing the papacy back to Peter is contrived and false. It required centuries for the papacy to develop. Catholic historians tell of numerous popes who were notoriously wicked. They claim that a pope's evil character does not invalidate the authority of his office. If we were speaking of a governmental office, such a claim might have some validity. But we are speaking of the claim to be the spiritual head of the universal church. The hierarchal pyramid of totalitarian authority of a combined secular and ecclesiastical system was developed first and then efforts were, and are, made to justify it by the Scriptures.

It was not until the end of the fifth century that the Roman Church was completely organized. She did not have an Archbishop until the end of the fourth century, and it was centuries later before she had Cardinals and Popes (*Catholic Ency.*, Vol. IX, p. 61, and *Catholic Ency.*, Vol. IV, p. 44). Yet this "Holy See" claims that her Popes and Cardinals can be traced back to the first century A. D. and that Peter was the first Pope. These and other startling facts from the Catholic Encyclopedia may be read at Buff Scott's website at www.mindspring.com/~renewal/Catholicism.html>.

Some claimants to the throne were appointed by kings, some by other bishops, some inherited the throne, one son of a pope was appointed by his mother, and another was appointed when he was twelve years old. The church lists 34 illegitimate claimants to the papal throne so that there were times when they were uncertain as to who was the pope. Did the Holy Spirit guide the officials to elect the wrong man at times? Were there times when the universal church had no certain head? This is all foreign to the Scriptures.

In the evening of Jesus' betrayal, "*A dispute also arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves'*" (Luke 22:24-26). If Peter was to be appointed head of the church, the chief apostle, or the ruling bishop, this conversation at the Last Supper would have opened the way for Jesus to tell them that Peter would be the authoritative figure over them. Instead of teaching that, Jesus denied that there would be any rulers over his people. The leader would be the one who served, but service would not make one a ruler at the top of a hierarchal pyramid. It is a sad defamation of Peter to attribute any such office to Peter. Are we supposed to reverence a man or men who do that?

According to inspired history, elders were appointed in various congregations. None were elevated above others nor could they enact new laws. To other elders Peter identified himself as a fellow elder, not a chief elder, chief of the apostles, archbishop, cardinal, or any such office given popes as is mentioned above. He wrote, "*So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed. Tend the flock of God that is in your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock*" (1 Peter 5:1-3). These words did not come from a man who wore fine vestments and a bejeweled tiara but from one who declared to a beggar, "*I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk*" (Acts 3:1-6).

Claims based on this passage have been made that the church was built upon Peter: *“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do men say that the Son of man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter (‘petros’, a detached stone or boulder) and on this rock (‘petra’, a mass of rock) I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven’” (Matt. 16:13-19).*

Jesus made a play on words. Peter’s name meant “rock” and Peter had just confessed the Rock upon which the congregation of the saved would be formed, that is, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. That foundation of our salvation was not a detached stone or boulder but the massive rock of Jesus’ divinity.

As to the keys promised him, Peter used them on Pentecost and at the household of Cornelius when he opened the spiritual kingdom to both Jew and Gentile who would believe that which Peter had confessed and in repentance submit to him in baptism. That is still bound on earth and in heaven. When Jesus revealed himself to the other disciples, he *“breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’” (John 20:10-23).* That was the same promise given to Peter. There is no record of them going about forgiving sins or refusing forgiveness. They proclaimed the Gospel message through which faith and obedience and forgiveness were effected. No priestly “alter Christs” on earth can pronounce forgiveness. Men can only announce the message through which it may be gained.

Even though I have no desire to be offensive, I realize that if you believe in the papacy and the hierarchal system, you will consider me most offensive. But what else can I do? Can I be true to Christ by remaining silent? I am not your judge but I must urge you, even as Peter does, to make your calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10). []

(Cecil Hook; April 2005)

Talkin’ Texas: “The Roads of Texas,” from which I gather some of these facts, was printed – where else but in Canada!