

The Pope and the Anti-Pope

By Jim Seghers

With the surprising resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, the media presented us with whirl of speculation about their imagined hidden intrigue behind his action. After all, it couldn't be as straightforward as his physical inability to effectively lead the Catholic Church. Subsequently, these pundits were unwittingly amusing and sophomoric as they speculated about the approaching conclave projecting their rigid paradigms of the American political system into the papal election. Now with the election of Pope Francis, they can't seem to wrap their minds around the compatibility between humility and caring for the downtrodden on the one hand and doctrinal and moral orthodoxy on the other. Perhaps studying the Gospels would expand their horizons. In any case, the secular U.S. media is not the focus of this essay.

The story of the first Pope to resign from the papal office is much more interesting. The protagonists in our narrative are four Popes: Zephyrinus, Callistus, Urban I, Pontian and Hippolytus, the man who opposed them and became the first antipope. The fact that all five became saints, yes even Hippolytus, adds flavor to the story. These events unfolded during the Roman persecution of the late second and early third centuries, beginning with the election of gentle Pope St. Zephyrinus (199-217), the fifteenth bishop of Rome following St. Peter. The antagonist was the priest Hippolytus, a man of contradictions, who was not known as warm and cuddly – nor humble, for that matter.

Hippolytus was in fact the most important third century theologian in the West. By all accounts he was thoroughly orthodox. However, he was also judgmental, critical, pugnacious, unforgiving, rigid, and generally unpleasant. His first confrontation with the papacy came during the pontificate of the holy Zephyrinus. Hippolytus severely criticized Pope Zephyrinus for not more forcefully condemning the Modalists, who taught that the Son was merely a manifestation of the divine Nature rather than a separate Divine Person. As a result of this error, they believed that the Father, not the Son, suffered on Calvary. Pope Zephyrinus was cautious in his condemnation, because the errors of the Modalists were not yet apparent. However, the rupture became complete when inflexible Hippolytus was passed over upon the death of St. Zephyrinus and Callistus was elected as his successor in 217.

The election of Pope Callistus was too much for Hippolytus to bear because, to say the least, Callistus had a tarnished background. Callistus was a slave of a Christian master, who placed him in charge of a bank that was established to watch over the money of widows and orphans. Instead, Callistus mismanaged the assets, which were squandered. Indeed, he was even accused of embezzlement. Callistus attempted flight to avoid punishment. He was caught and sentenced to a lifetime of punishment chained to a mill stone. However, the victims he defrauded obtained his release. Things went from bad to worse when Callistus started a brawl in a synagogue. Apparently, he was attempting to lay the blame for his bad investments on Jewish businessmen. This unfortunate incident led to his trial and conviction. He was given a death sentence in the mines in Sardinia. Once again, his life was spared, but now he came under the influence of the saintly priest Zephyrinus. As he grew in holiness, Callistus was

ordained a deacon and placed in charge of the catacomb that now bears his name. Upon the election of Zephyrinus as pope, Callistus became one of his most trusted advisors. Then he was elected pope following his saintly mentor's death.

Hippolytus was so outraged with the election of Callistus that he met with a small band of his supporters who declared that he, not Callistus, was the legitimate pope. Thus, Hippolytus became the first anti-pope. The burning issue in Rome at the time was the decision by Pope Callistus to forgive the sins that Hippolytus and his followers considered to be particularly grave, for example, murder, adultery and fornication. The rigorist Hippolytus argued that absolution should be denied to anyone who committed these sins, however genuine and profound was their contrition. This severe theologian loved the Church, but he was misled in promoting his list of unforgivable sins. Hippolytus dubbed Pope Callistus a heretic because he held views contrary to his own.

No one's sinfulness is beyond the scope of God's mercy. Therefore, Pope Callistus taught that the Church had the power and the duty to forgive even the most serious sins, if the sinner was genuinely repentant. Pope Callistus accepted Hippolytus' barbs and criticisms with kindness and patience, but he would not deviate from his position, which became the accepted teaching of the whole Church.

In the year 222, St. Callistus was attacked by a Roman mob and hurled to his death from a precipice. Hippolytus was again passed over during the next papal election in favor of Pope St. Urban I. When he died in 230, Pope St. Pontian became the eighteenth pope. Hippolytus and his followers remained in opposition to Pope Urban and his successor Pope Pontian. During this entire period, persecutions from the Roman Empire would periodically intensify.

Such was the case in the year 235 when Pope Pontian and the anti-pope Hippolytus were sentenced to death in the mines of Sardinia. The humble Pontian did not want to leave the Church without a spiritual leader. Therefore, he resigned from the papal office, the first pope to do so. It's touching to think of these two men laboring together in the inhuman conditions in Sardinia. Hippolytus' heart was moved by the holiness and humility of Pope Pontian as the two men trudged and labored to their deaths. This led Hippolytus to reconcile with the Church, which he communicated to his followers. That same year these two men died as martyrs. To illustrate that the Church has a sense of humor, the feast day of these two martyrs, Pope St. Pontian and the anti-pope St. Hippolytus, is celebrated together on August 13.

Most Catholics are unaware that they regularly encounter one of Hippolytus' important liturgical works, the Second Eucharistic Prayer. When it is used at Mass it can serve as a reminder that God also has a sense of humor, because the canonization of Hippolytus is a reminder that everyone who repents is also called to become a saint. If St. Hippolytus made it, we all have a shot!