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Bearded popes, forgotten popes and papal children: papal trivia in this popeless time

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Mar. 7, 2013 Young Voices
Conclave 2013

So much of the world has begun to view the Catholic church as trivial for a variety of reasons because of its perceived irrelevance on several social issues. These issues range from leadership accountability on the sex abuse crisis to women's leadership roles in the church. They may also include interfaith and interdenominational relations, as well as the meaning of liturgy. Behind Roman Catholicism, the second largest "denomination" around the world remains former Roman Catholics.

And so now we have a pope that has retired, the first instance of such in more than 600 years. It is certainly not a trivial role. My Facebook feed full of Catholic and non-Catholic friends alike blew up. People take notice when the leader of a group of 1.2 billion decides to call it a career.

There are so many nuances that so many of us don't understand about the papacy (and that's probably OK). It really is a fascinating office. I'm glad I don't have to answer some of these harder questions: How does one become a *palafrenieri* (one of the 12 men in red uniforms that carries the mobile papal throne)? Would a non-Catholic be able to survive the streets of the absolute theocratic elective monarchy of Vatican City? Will the state of Vatican City ever field an Olympic team?

Much is being written lately about the legacy of Pope Benedict XVI, what the significance of his retirement is, and who would make the best successor to represent the Roman Catholic church. There's so much richness and history to this office. Let's take a look at some interesting papal trivia in this time of transition.

Who is the most forgotten pope among the living generations?

Pope John Paul I survived only 33 days in office, passing away Sept. 28, 1978. It created a rare year of three popes, and JPI was the first pope born and the last to die in the 20th century. He was the first pope to take two names, and the first to use "the first" in his regal name. Liberals fondly remember his papacy as being full of possibility, cut short by a variety of conspiracy theories. It's unfortunate his papacy wasn't able to play out, and even more unfortunate it was even shorter than some sermons.

Are popes always celibate? Can popes have children?

Well, with God, all things are possible. I didn't find much on popes having children during the papacy, but there is some documentation on popes who were married before entering the clergy, including Peter, the first pope. There are references to his mother-in-law in each of the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Many other popes are said to have children before receiving Holy Orders, including Pope St. Hormisdas (514 to 523), father of Pope St. Silverius. Pope Clement IV (1265 to 1268) had two children before receiving Holy Orders, both daughters who eventually joined a convent. Another Pope Benedict who resigned, in this case Pope Benedict IX (whose papacy ran in 1044, 1045 and 1047-48), was said to have resigned from the papacy so he

could pursue marriage after a papacy that was said to include sodomy and bestiality, as well as sponsoring orgies.

Does Las Vegas do odds on having a bearded pope?

Maybe, but I wouldn't put money on it based on this article in the *Telegraph* [1]. There was a time when bearded popes were as common as tattooed NBA players, with Clement VII starting the trend in 1523 and 23 popes following that lead through Innocent XII in 1700. Few bearded cardinals are permitted to join the conclave. As this article concludes, it's more likely we'll have a black pope than a bearded pope.

What's next?

The next pope faces extreme challenges, including continuing to deal with the fallout from the worldwide clergy abuse crisis and maintaining cohesiveness with a globalizing, growing church. There are many perceptions of who the pope is and what the pope must do. You don't have to go far on reading opinion pieces on that, beginning with this website. The beauty of this time of transition is that we don't know what new arc of history and resulting trivia will come about.

[Mike Sweitzer-Beckman helped launch the blog youngadultcatholics-blog.com [2] in 2008. He also blogs at sweitman-solutions.com [3] about technology.]

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