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## Sede Vacante

*"When some among them I had recognized,  
I looked, and I beheld the shade of him  
Who made through cowardice the great refusal."  
Dante, The Divine Comedy*

**By Lee Strong**  
Staff writer

With these words, the poet Dante Alighieri fictionally consigned to hell Pope St. Celestine V, whose "great refusal" was abdicating the papacy on Dec. 13, 1294 — a scant five months after his election.

Apparently, few of the poet's contemporaries agreed with Dante's harsh judgment; Celestine V was canonized in 1313.

According to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Celestine V was, at the time of his election, an 85-year-old hermit noted primarily for holiness and simplicity. The College of Cardinals selected

him as a compromise candidate after 27 months of deliberation following the death of Pope Nicholas V on April 4, 1292.

Pope St. Celestine resigned after resolving that

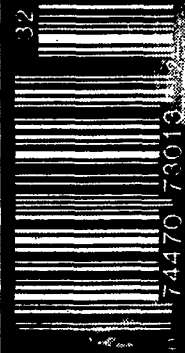
he was incompetent to run the church. He died in 1296 after being confined in a castle for the last two years of his life by his successor, Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303).

The story of Pope St. Celestine V touches on concerns raised recently by Pope John Paul II's surgery to remove a benign tumor.

Among those concerns is what happens to the Catholic Church's governance if a pope dies or resigns, throwing the church into a period known as *Sede Vacante* ("the Holy See is vacant").

How does the church function if the cardinals

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