

# Rumors persist about pope's health

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Ever since Pope John Paul II's surgery last summer, rumors have been circulating in Rome about the true condition of his health and — more recently — about his eventual resignation from office.

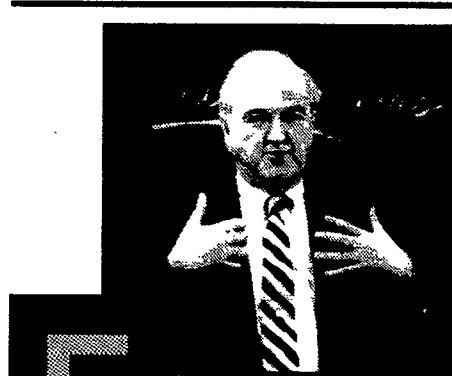
Several cancer specialists quoted in the press since July have pointed out that a tumor the size of an orange is almost never benign, notwithstanding Vatican assurances to the contrary.

The pope's post-operative public appearances in Rome have only served to fuel the speculation. He has looked drawn and fatigued. And during the Holy Father's recent visit to the Dominican Republic for the meeting of the Latin American Bishops Conference, he followed an uncharacteristically limited schedule.

It is not surprising that the Vatican has denied the rumors. Even if they were true, confirming them would undermine the Roman Curia's capacity to maintain control over the world's bishops and religious communities.

If denials do not put the rumors to rest, we can count on the emergence of two story lines in the secular and religious media: one regarding Celestine V, the only pope to have resigned from the papacy, and the other regarding possible successors to John Paul II.

After Nicholas IV's death in April, 1292, the papal throne remained vacant for 27 months because the 12 cardinal-electors couldn't muster the



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two-thirds vote for a new pope. With political, military and popular pressures mounting, the cardinals moved the conclave from Rome to Perugia.

On July 5, 1294, the dean of the college of cardinals, Latino Malabranca, disclosed to his fellow cardinals a prophecy written by a devout, 85-year-old hermit, the renowned Pietro del Morrone. The prophecy said they would all suffer divine retribution if they continued to deprive the church of an earthly head.

Cardinal Malabranca then cast his own vote for the hermit and the others — exhausted by the long stalemate — gradually followed his lead. The final vote was unanimous.

Pietro del Morrone accepted his election under extreme protest, but it

was otherwise widely acclaimed. Some thought of him as an "angel pope" who would usher in the age of the Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately, Celestine (the name he chose) became captive to Charles II, the king of Sicily and Naples, who insisted that the new pope be consecrated within his domain and that he reside not in Rome, but in the Castel Nuovo in Naples.

Celestine appointed Charles' cronies to key positions in the curia and the papal state, and rubber-stamped the king's nominees for 12 cardinals. The pope also changed the rules for the next conclave, making the king its guardian.

The administration of church affairs fell into confusion. As Advent approached, the pope proposed handing over his power to three cardinals while he fasted and prayed, but the plan was rejected.

He considered abdication and consulted Cardinal Benedetto Caetani, a noted canonist, about the possibility. Caetani assured the pope that he could do it. So, on Dec. 13 Celestine read out a formula of abdication to a full consistory of cardinals, and then stripped off his papal insignia.

However, when he tried to return to his retreat on Mount Morrone, his successor, Boniface VIII (the same Benedetto Caetani who had encouraged him to resign) refused permission, lest the former pope become a rallying point for a schism.

Pietro was kept under guard, but

escaped and was at large for several months. Eventually recaptured, he was confined to a castle tower, where he soon died of an infection.

Under pressure from France's Philip IV, who had been a fierce opponent of Boniface VIII, Pope Clement V canonized the only pope ever to have resigned his office.

The media would love Celestine V's story, but if John Paul II were to resign, the other story line would be the more important. Who would succeed him?

The conventional wisdom would suggest that the next pope will be a carbon copy of this one, since John Paul II appointed most of the cardinal-electors.

But history teaches a different lesson. Popes are rarely succeeded by clones of themselves, even when their pontificates have been lengthy and they have made numerous appointments to the college of cardinals.

Pius IX's successor, Leo XIII, was very different from himself, and so, too, was Leo's successor, Pius X. Pius X was succeeded, in turn, by Benedict XV, and he by Pius XI. Each was anything but a carbon copy of his predecessor.

More recently, the aristocratic Pius XII was succeeded by the jolly peasant, John XXIII, and he by the austere and scholarly Paul VI. He was succeeded by the smiling John Paul I, and he by John Paul II.

For those not persuaded by the historical argument, how about the Holy Spirit?

# Without active laity, church does not act

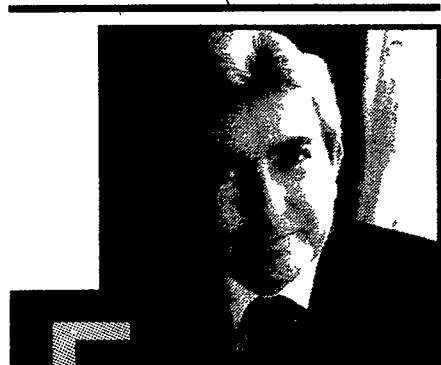
By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce  
Syndicated columnist

A different kind of church celebration was held in Chicago recently. No red skull caps were sighted, no papal messages read, no official sanction sought or received. It was a celebration of the laity's role in the world of job, family and community, and the guests of honor were two distinguished laypeople.

The occasion marked the 15th anniversary of the "Chicago Declaration of Christian Concern," a 1977 statement issued by 47 Chicago Catholics on the vocation of the laity in and to the world.

This declaration has proven to be one of the truly grass-roots documents in the history of the U.S. church. "The church is as present to the world in the ordinary roles of lay Christians as it is in the ecclesiastical roles of bishop and priest, though the styles of each differ," the statement insisted.

The declaration was and continues to be controversial on two main points. The first is the concern it raised



## FAITH AND WORK

about the development of lay ministry in the church.

"It is our experience that a wholesome and significant movement with the church — the involvement of lay people in many church ministries — has led to a devaluation of the unique ministry of lay men and women. The tendency has been to see lay ministry

as involvement in some church-related activity, e.g. religious education, pastoral care for the sick and elderly, or readers in church on Sunday."

The declaration's second caution was what its signers called "the steady depreciation ... of the ordinary social roles through which the laity serve and act upon the world.

"The impression is often created," they argued, "that one can work for justice and peace only by stepping outside of these ordinary roles as a businessperson, as a mayor, as a factory worker, as a professional in the State Department, or as an active union member and thus that one can change the system only as an 'outsider' to the society and the system."

Such views of social change, the declaration says, "clearly depart from the mainstream of Catholic social thought which regards the advance of social justice as essentially the service performed within one's professional and occupational milieu."

It is in this context that the National Center for the Laity, the celebration's sponsor, honored Ed and Evie

Stephan, two Chicago laypeople who have spent their entire lives trying to bring about social justice inside the institutions of law, health care, politics, education, church and family, with the first-ever "Faith and Work" award.

As Ed Stephan said in his acceptance remarks: "In my early years of exposure to Catholic teaching, the message was clear and stern: avoid sin, attend Mass, receive the sacraments, pray regularly and stay in the state of grace. All good things, of course, and necessary for the development of personal piety, which was invariably (and almost exclusively) where the stress was placed ... But it is also our duty as Christians to bring to every facet of life the message of love, service and care. Each of us must play a part — some great, some small — in the salvation of the world."

"In the last analysis," the Chicago declaration concluded, "the church speaks to and acts upon the world through her laity. Without a dynamic laity conscious of its personal ministry to the world, the church, in effect, does not speak or act."

*Faith is to believe what we do not see; and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe.*

St. Augustine

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