

# Pope shows new pastoral urgency as he turns 75

By John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Age 75 brings retirement for most bishops, but for Pope John Paul II it has brought out a new pastoral urgency.

The pope, who celebrates his 75th birthday May 18, has been slowed physically over the last few years and looks every bit his age. At a meeting with pilgrims in early May, he read his talk slumped in a chair with one eye squinted shut, his strands of white hair ruffled by a spring breeze.

The day before, he had joked with Italian youths that he might not make it to the year 2000. "Maybe. We'll see," he said.

But behind the self-deprecating humor and the stooped profile, Vatican observers have noticed a growing papal determination to settle some old issues and embark on major new projects.

"He's much less interested in the smaller administrative details. I don't think he's working any less, but he's concentrating on the things that are important to him," said one senior Vatican official.

Those include life-and-death issues such as abortion and euthanasia, an overall strengthening of the church's missionary outreach and an ambitious program of synods and ceremonies to mark the start of Christianity's third millennium.

Far from a slowdown, several Vatican curial departments are reporting an increase in workload as these and other projects take shape.

On a personal level, too, the pope at 75 seems more determined to speak his mind — and let the chips fall.

What some describe as a more "combative" papal style was evident in 1994, when the pontiff almost single-handedly whipped up opposition to a proposed U.N. document on population control. Several times, warning that the docu-



Reuters/RNS

**Pope John Paul II presides over the May 14 ordination of 40 new priests at St. Peter's Basilica. The pope turns 75 on May 18.**

ment could codify a "right to abortion," he let his anger show.

The high-level delegation he sent to the U.N. conference in Cairo, Egypt, won important concessions — a process that has encouraged the pope and his aides as they prepare for another possible showdown over similar issues at a

U.N. conference on women in September.

The pope's last two encyclicals, on moral truths and pro-life issues, have also demonstrated a greater willingness to challenge attitudes and behavior in contemporary society. Significantly, his latest document was addressed to "all people of good will;" the pope has deliberately sought to widen his audience over the last couple of years, and Vatican officials say he will continue to do so as the year 2000 approaches.

He is successfully exploring new media in an effort to get his messages across to the general public, with a best-selling book and rosary CD in the last year.

Part of the pope's new approach is his desire to close debate on certain controversial church issues. His 1994 letter expressing a definitive "no" to women priests was one example; another is his repeated insistence on priestly celibacy in the Latin-rite church.

The pope plans to devote more time and effort to ecumenism and interreligious relations over the next few years. A major encyclical on Christian unity is in the works, and he has outlined a string of meetings with various faiths and religions to usher in the third millennium.

As a world traveler, his white tornado pace has been slowed by broken bones in recent years. But even if he has to limp or shuffle, the pope has shown he is determined to keep up his pastoral pilgrimages. He is marking his 75th year with six separate trips to Asia, Poland and the Czech Republic, Belgium, Slovakia, the United States and four African countries.

Reporters covering the Vatican have noticed that along with the pope's more focused sense of priorities, a more relaxed style occasionally surfaces. He is more apt to put aside prepared texts when meeting with groups, or just relax for minutes at a time and listen to the pilgrims singing at weekly audiences.

When he twirls his cane as a prop and jokes about his age, pilgrims now glimpse a pope who can laugh at himself — at least a little.

No one at the Vatican is seriously talking about retirement, although sources say the pope has not ruled it out as an option for the future. But in 1994, after his thigh bone operation, he told his doctor he had to get well because "there is no place for a retired pope."

## Ebola virus is taking toll on missionaries in Zaire

By John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

ROME — Five missionary sisters were among the dozens killed in Zaire by a mysterious disease that authorities attributed to the deadly Ebola virus.

The toll was 77 as of press time.

Ten other women religious were being kept in isolation in Zaire after coming in contact with the disease, but were reportedly not infected.

Pope John Paul II, speaking at the Vatican May 14, said he was following news of the missionaries' deaths and the "very serious epidemic" with concern and prayers.

Four of the deceased religious, Italian Sisters Floralba Rondi, Clara Angela Ghilardi, Dinarosa Belleri and Danielangela Sorti, were medical workers in Kikwit. Members of the Sisters of the Little Poor, a religious order based in Bergamo in northern Italy, they had worked in Zaire for up to 40 years.

Kikwit, a city of about 600,000 people, was quarantined and surrounded by Zairian troops in early May.

The virus also killed a young Zairian nun, Sister Eugenie Kabina, a nursing student in Kikwit. An official of her Italian-based order, the Sisters of St. Joseph, said the religious community was very worried about the situation in Zaire since it has several women religious working in the area and several other nursing students among its members.

Italian health authorities were meanwhile closely watching two other sisters who traveled to Zaire for the funeral of an earlier victim. They were in quarantine but reportedly in good condition.

Ebola, a highly contagious disease spread through bodily fluids, causes death in about 90 percent of the people it infects. It causes hemorrhaging, fever and vomiting, and there is no known treatment or vaccine. It is considered one of the deadliest viruses ever identified.

Zairian officials said the outbreak began April 10 at the Kikwit hospital after doctors and nurses were contaminated by a surgery patient. In 1976, an Ebola outbreak killed 276 people in a Zairian village.

In Baltimore, Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency, said it oversaw delivery of \$3,000 worth of medical supplies to a Catholic hospital in Kikwit.

The supplies were delivered in partnership with the Church of Christ in Zaire, which sponsors an umbrella organization of Protestant, church-based agencies. Among those agencies is the Missionary Aviation Fellowship, which flew the CRS-funded supplies into Kikwit.

A statement from CRS said it and other aid agencies working in Zaire were helping to deliver an additional \$25,000 in emergency medical aid, provided through the U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance.

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