

COLUMNISTS

Pope preparing for 'any eventuality'

A cover story in the influential French magazine *L'Express* (Aug. 29-Sept. 4), entitled "Should the Pope Resign?", has had surprisingly little attention in the United States. Written by the Italian journalist Giancarlo Zizola, the best-informed and most astute observer of the Vatican scene, it underlines key elements in the still-unfolding story of the twilight of this pontificate.

First, in early August there was a middle-of-the-night rush to the local Catholic hospital in Albano, just four kilometers from the papal villa at Castel Gandolfo. Pope John Paul II had been suffering from violent intestinal pains, far more intense than at Christmas of last year, when he had to suspend the reading of his Christmas message to the city and to the world.

Given the pope's condition in August, his physician decided against a helicopter trip back to the Gemelli polyclinic in Rome, and had him transported to the local hospital in Lancia, with a chauffeur, a security person and his private secretary, Msgr. Stanislas Dziwisz, on board. Everyone was sworn to absolute secrecy by Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano.

The next day a communique was issued saying only that the pope had a routine examination and that he had a fever related to a digestive disorder. Although his general audience and some other commitments were canceled (just as audiences



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

and commitments had to be canceled in February and April), the pope decided to go through with his visits to Hungary and France in early and mid-September.

Zizola underscores the importance of the approaching new millennium for understanding what drives this pope, in spite of his dramatically failing health. John Paul II firmly believes that, upon his election to the papacy in 1978, he was destined by divine providence to lead the church into the Third Christian Millennium. Immediately after that conclave, his fellow countryman and mentor, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, made that same prediction.

The pope also firmly believes that divine providence and the Blessed Mother saved him from death on the occasion of the assassination attempt in Saint Peter's Square 15 years ago, and that they will protect him from ultimate harm at least until after he

has ushered in the new millennium.

Nevertheless, Zizola points out, the pope has prepared for the possibility that he might become incapacitated in office. On Feb. 23 he promulgated an apostolic constitution containing new rules for papal elections. The third article explicitly provides for the possibility that a vacancy may occur not only through death but also through "valid resignation of the pope" — a possibility not envisioned in Pope Paul VI's own constitution on papal elections.

The resignation option was also anticipated in the new Code of Canon Law: "If it should happen that the Roman Pontiff resigns his office, it is required for validity that he makes the resignation freely and that it be duly manifested, but not that it be accepted by anyone" (canon 332.2).

In mid-September a report appeared in two of Rome's major daily newspapers that the pope had already submitted a letter of resignation to the Secretary of State, Cardinal Sodano, with the stipulation that it take effect when and if the pope becomes incapable of fulfilling his duties. The Vatican denied the report, but many in Rome believed the story to be true.

It is strange that some of this pope's most partisan supporters are so quick to deny or make light of growing evidence that the pope wishes to be prepared for any eventuality.

Isn't this a sign, after all, of John Paul II's deep concern for the church? What is finally important for him is not whether he remains in office until death but whether the good of the church is served.

For those wondering, there is precedent for a papal resignation, and it is not limited to the one case always brought forward when the subject is raised; namely, that of the elderly Celestine V, who in 1294 resigned after only five months in office.

The first papal resignation actually occurred more than a thousand years earlier. Pope Pontian was arrested by the Roman emperor in March 235, during a renewed campaign of persecution, and was deported to Sardinia, the "island of death." Since deportation was usually for life and few survived it, the pope resigned on Sept. 28 in order to allow for the election of a successor, which occurred on Nov. 21.

However, the new pope, Ansterus, died of natural causes less than 1½ months after his election. Such are the ways of divine providence.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame. He will speak at Church of the Transfiguration, 50 W. Bloomfield Road, Pittsford, at 7:30 p.m. Oct. 17, and in Strong Auditorium at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, 1100 S. Goodman St., Rochester, at 10 a.m. Oct. 18, in a talk sponsored by St. Bernard's Institute.

New welfare system needs our help

The basic question of welfare — what is the responsibility of a civilization to its poor — has not been solved. It has only been transferred from the federal to the state and local politicians who are unprepared to deal with the demands of destitution.

This crisis is an opportunity for the Catholic community to lead the discussion and planning for how best to meet human needs. First and foremost, the poor need living wage jobs. But how much is a living wage? Including health benefits plus enough to afford day care and pay a share of society's taxes, the current figure is about \$11 an hour.

President Clinton has called for every business to create one new job. But what sort of support do Catholic company owners need to create new family-wage work? They need encouragement from the pulpit. Even more, they need to support one another in small prayer groups and in public forums. They need the model of the parish and the diocese hiring a few new workers.



BY MARY ANN MCGIVERN, SL

ordinary time

Where will the money for these jobs come from? We all will have to tighten our belts, take a little less profit and recognize that an investment in jobs now will benefit the community for a lifetime.

But if small business and the local church are going to pay living wages, they need workers capable of doing a good day's work. But what is the measure of good work? Of excellent performance?

People new to the work force need to experience pride in a job well-done. If they have a mentor to listen to their accounts of small victories and frustra-

tions, it's more likely they will meet with success. If we believe in the dignity of work, if we want a community where everyone shares both the labor and the rewards, then we have to be mentors.

Mentors are especially important for women who have been on welfare. They will face not only challenges on the job, but also such concerns as getting their families up and dressed, lunches packed, children on the bus, the youngest child at day care, and themselves to work on time. And what happens when a child gets sick? Can Catholic working women find the time to be mentors to these new working women?

If the local church members have this hands-on experience with helping to resolve some of these issues, then we will be equipped to enter the public policy debate and insist that new jobs pay decent wages and provide a good support system, particularly for women getting off welfare.

As federal resources diminish, the state and the local community will have to decide very quickly how much free health care to offer and whether to cut

back on public school services like kindergarten, after-school care, sports and music. But such social concerns as adequate housing, quality of day care and access to transportation are all unresolved — and solutions are underfunded. Besides these, on-the-job issues like unionization, pension benefits, and opportunities for advancement need to be faced.

Finally, how will we assist the worker who fails at her first job? Will she and her children be put out in the cold? Or will an organized and loving community of faith invest even more resources in her, to help her overcome her failure and achieve a secure place in the work force?

We often laughingly warn one another to be careful what we ask for, because we might get it. We asked for welfare reform and we got it. Now it is our job as followers of Jesus, who was a carpenter to design a better system that meets the needs of the poor.

Sister McGivern, a Sister of Loretto at the Foot of the Cross, is director of the St. Louis Economic Conversion Project in St. Louis, Mo.

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