

COLUMNISTS

A pope always reserves option to resign

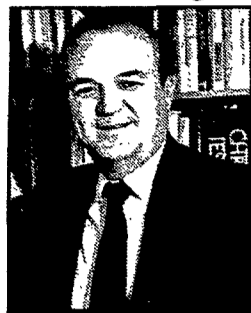
Bishop Karl Lehmann, president of the German Bishops Conference, created something of a stir a few weeks ago in responding to a television interviewer's question whether the pope might choose this new millennial year to resign.

Bishop Lehmann pointed out that he has great personal respect for the pope and was impressed with the pope's active presence at the recent European Bishops Synod. However, he continued, the pope would surely have "the strength and the courage" to resign if he thought he could no longer do the job.

The comment generated an immediate reaction. Some Italian cardinals found the speculation offensive and insulting, and were quick to assure everyone that the pope is in full command of his job. One of Bishop Lehmann's own hierarchical colleagues, Cardinal Joachim Meisner of Cologne, also rushed to the pope's defense.

In the United States, National Public Radio left listeners with the distinct impression that the president of the German Bishops Conference had indeed called for the pope's resignation.

The next day Bishop Lehmann claimed that he had been misunderstood. When asked whether the pope might resign because of ill health, he had



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

said: "I have confidence in the pope that when he feels he is no longer capable of leading the church with responsibility, he will have the strength and the courage to say 'I cannot fulfill this as is required.'"

For the past two or three years, concerns have increasingly been expressed in private, both inside and outside the Vatican, about the pope's health and about his capacity to meet his pastoral and administrative responsibilities. Until now, however, it has been an underground discussion.

The reaction to Bishop Lehmann's remarks on German television indicates how sensitive this matter is for many Catholics, perhaps especially those who have a vested interest in a continuation of this pontificate for as long as possible.

One thinks, for example, of those who

would lose their personal access to the papal apartment and dinner table, and the prestige associated with it; of others who might forfeit their high-ranking Vatican positions; and of still others who have aspirations for an episcopal appointment or advancement within the hierarchy, given the current criteria employed in the naming of bishops and in their promotion to larger dioceses.

Does such "careerism" exist in the church? At least three Vatican cardinals have said as much publicly: Vincenzo Fagiolo, former president of the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts; Bernardin Gantin, dean of the College of Cardinals and former prefect of the Congregation for Bishops; and Joseph Ratzinger, current head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Too many people still think that popes simply do not, or perhaps cannot, resign. Contrary to popular misconception, popes can resign, and at least four, and possibly six, have, in fact, resigned their office; the most recent in 1415.

Indeed, the church's Code of Canon Law explicitly allows for papal resignation: "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" (can. 332.2). And in his own new rules for the election of a pope, promulgated in 1996, John Paul II himself explicitly acknowledged that a vacancy in the office can occur not only by a pope's death but also by his "valid resignation" (Part I, n.1).

Significantly, the code does not provide any procedure by which a sitting pope can be removed from office for reasons of physical or mental incapacity. Given present advances in medical technology and health care, it is at least conceivable that a pope could remain in office long after he has lost his ability even to recognize people.

One can only imagine a comparable situation if Ronald Reagan, now in an advanced stage of Alzheimer's disease, were still president of the United States and there were no constitutional provisions for his removal from office (see Article XXV, section 4).

And one can also only imagine the reaction if Bishop Lehmann had raised that concern on German television last month.

...
Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

The true meaning of happiness

Fifth Sunday of the Year (Feb. 5): (R3) Mark 1:29-39. (R1) Job 7:1-4, 6-7. (R2) 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23.

Neither fame, nor wealth, nor popularity bring happiness. So often the teachings of Jesus ran counter to the messages the world gives us about happiness. Crowds surrounded Jesus. His disciples thought this was great. But not Jesus. Where, then, can we find happiness?

Happiness begins with a touch. Jesus was visiting the home of Simon Peter. Simon's mother-in-law was sick in bed with a high fever. Jesus went over to her, touched her, and lifted her up. Immediately she was healed. All Jesus did was touch her.

To say thanks, she immediately got up and began serving Jesus and his disciples.

Happiness is not simply an option we exercise. Happiness begins with a touch — the touch of the Master's hand.

Happiness also comes when we discover the power of prayer. The world says that the busier we are, the happier we are. That's a mistake. Consider Jesus' approach.

By nightfall word had spread throughout the town that Jesus was there and



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

that he had the power to heal people. By dusk the whole city was at Simon's house looking for Jesus. They brought their sick and all those possessed by demons. The disciples had never seen such a crowd. Jesus cured them all. He must have been exhausted when they all left. Yet early the next morning, Jesus awoke alone and searched for a lonely place, where the crowd would be unable to find him, so he could be alone to pray. He had given much to others, now he needed time to be alone with his Father and recoup his powers. So with us: we need time to be alone with God each day.

Some people are so superficial when it comes to their understanding of prayer. "Hey, Father," said a man talking to a priest. "You got it all wrong about

this God stuff. He doesn't exist — I oughta know."

"Why's that, my son?" asked the priest.

"Well, said the man, "when I was ice-fishing in the Arctic far from the nearest village, a blizzard blew up with the wind and snow. I was a goner. So I got down on my knees and prayed real hard, begging God for help."

"And did he help you?" asked the priest.

"Heck no," said the man. "God didn't lift a finger. Some Eskimo appeared out of nowhere and showed me the way."

Finally, happiness is getting our priorities in order. We need to take inventory of our lives to determine what's important and what is not. Jesus did.

The next morning when Simon and the other disciples awoke, they discovered that Jesus was gone. When they found him, Simon said, "Everybody is looking for you!" Jesus answered, "Let us move on to the neighboring villages so that I may proclaim the good news there also. That is what I have come to do." Jesus would not be sidetracked by the adulation of the crowds. He knew where he was headed. Nothing else mattered.

A teacher once helped some Jews who

had escaped from Hitler's Germany. Some of his students said he shouldn't have done that, saying, "They were not even Christians."

"No they weren't," the wise teacher quietly replied, "but I am."

Happiness is the touch of the Master's hand. It is discovering the power of prayer. It is having our priorities straight.

...
Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, February 7

1 Kings 8:1-7, 9-13; Mark 6:53-56

Tuesday, February 8

1 Kings 8:22-23, 27-30;

Mark 7:1-13

Wednesday, February 9

1 Kings 10:1-10; Mark 7:14-23

Thursday, February 10

1 Kings 11:4-13; Mark 7:24-30

Friday, February 11

1 Kings 11:29-32, 12:19;

Mark 7:31-37

Saturday, February 12

1 Kings 12:26-32, 13:33-34;

Mark 8:1-10



AGENDA

REGISTRATION
8:30-9:30

CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST
9:30-10:15

WELCOME: Don Alhart
KEYNOTE SPEAKER:

Dr. Rose Dobrof
Prof. of Gerontology
at Hunter College
10:45 - 11:45 AM

PERSPECTIVES ON DIGNITY
11:45 - 12 NOON
QUESTIONS

FREE OF CHARGE

GROWING OLDER
WITH INDEPENDENCE,
OPPORTUNITY
AND DIGNITY

Friday, Feb. 18, 2000
8:30 am - 12 noon

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