

# COLUMNISTS

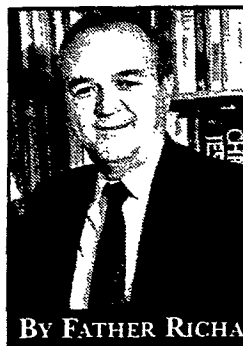
## Pope John Paul II's longevity, legacy, laxity

On the 16th of this month, Pope John Paul II completed the 22nd year of his pontificate. Just two weeks before that, he had surpassed Alexander III (1159-81) and became the sixth-longest reigning pope in history.

The next pope ahead of him is Pius VII (1800-23), who was in office for 23 years and just over four and one-half months. John Paul II would not pass him until the first week of March, 2002. Six and one-half months later, he would exceed Hadrian I's term of 23 years, 10 months, and just over two weeks (772-95) and become the fourth-longest reigning pope.

In less than eight months after that (in April 2003), he would pass Pius VI (1775-99) as the third-longest reigning pope. Pius was in office for 24 years, six months, and one week. According to the *Annuario Pontificio*, the official Vatican directory, Pius VI's pontificate was one week longer because the *Annuario* calculates it from the day of Pius' election rather than from the day of his consecration as bishop of Rome. Pius was a cardinal but not a bishop at the time of his election.

This is really a theological, not a historical, question. The pope is, before all else, the bishop of Rome. One who is not yet a bishop cannot be the bishop of Rome until consecrated as such. The revised Code



### essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

of Canon Law now requires that if a non-bishop is elected to the papacy, he must immediately be consecrated a bishop (Canon 332).

Having surpassed Pius VI, John Paul II would still have another 10 months and three weeks to go before catching up with Leo XIII (1878-1903), the second-longest reigning pope in history. That would take us to sometime in March 2004. The present pope would be nearly 84 years of age.

The hill becomes steeper after that. The longest-reigning pope of all time is Pius IX (1846-78), in office for 31 years, seven months, and three weeks. John Paul II would have to remain in office until June 2010, when he would have just turned 90.

What these statistics do not take into account are the circumstances under which this pope, or any other pope, would lose

his physical and/or mental capacity to function though still alive, at least in the biological sense of the word. Not having been declared dead, he would remain officially the one and only pope. What then?

Just prior to John Paul II's 22nd anniversary on Oct. 16, there was a flurry of phone calls from various newspapers and other media outlets seeking comments about this pope's legacy. The conversations covered the usual territory: the pope's role in accelerating the implosion of the Soviet empire, especially through his steadfast support of the Solidarity movement in his native Poland; his outreach to Jews and other non-Christians; his giving voice to the concerns of the poor and the powerless; his strong moral leadership on a variety of issues.

Less flattering elements were also discussed: the appointment of single-minded loyalists to the hierarchy (unlike the practice of previous popes who selected bishops from a wider spectrum of candidates); the tendency to discourage and even suppress theological pluralism; the recentralization of authority in the Vatican.

A topic never receiving sufficient attention, however, is the pope's inexplicable failure to provide for his own succession (and for that of any other pope) in the case of physical and/or mental incapacity. In

this age of advanced medical technology, it is a fact that people can be kept alive long past the time when they can function in any meaningfully human manner.

The unfortunate situation of former President Ronald Reagan, in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease, comes immediately to mind. Imagine for the moment that the presidency of the United States were for life and there were no constitutional provisions, such as exist in the 25th Amendment, for the legal transfer of authority in the case where a president is still alive but unable to function.

Unfortunately, that is the very risk the Catholic Church faces today. In an article written just before his own death at age 60 and later published in *America* magazine, "What If the Pope Became Disabled?" (9/30/00), Father James Provost, who was one of the leading canon lawyers in the United States, referred to the lack of any canonical provision as a "serious vacuum in the church's constitutional law."

No one who truly cares about the welfare and unity of the church — not just for today, but for tomorrow as well — can ignore this gravest of risks. Least of all the pope himself.

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

## Jesus sees and cares

30th Sunday of the Year (Oct. 29): (R3) Mark 10:46-52; (R1) Jeremiah 31:7-9; (R2) Hebrews 5:1-6).

Thomas Watson, who built IBM, used to visit factories and spend hours conversing with workers. He welcomed employee concerns. One day an employee told Watson he had just received news that his brother had an incurable disease and would probably not live long. Watson arranged for the man's brother to be taken to a top hospital where he was put under the care of a famous specialist. The man, thanking Watson, began to apologize for inconveniencing him. Watson replied, "When I said bring your problems to me, I meant exactly that."

Jesus also says, "Bring me your problems," be they family problems, health problems, career problems, relationship problems, whatever they may be.

Bartimaeus was a blind beggar. There were no government programs for helping vision-impaired persons in those days. No white canes or seeing-eye dogs. Bartimaeus was on his own. It was lonely, demoralizing, sitting by the side of the road begging for alms. How slowly the hours must have passed. How little he must have collected — hardly enough for food for the day. Then one day Jesus passed by. Hope



### a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

danced in the heart of Bartimaeus.

Bartimaeus never gave up hope. Without hope he would never have cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" What powerful words. Jesus stopped. Here was the first thing Bartimaeus found about Jesus. Jesus was accessible.

How refreshing to know that the Lord of all the universe is accessible to each of us whatever our needs may be. It's quite staggering to think about. We don't have to fight our way through a battery of secretaries to reach our Lord. We don't have to journey on long pilgrimages.

Bartimaeus just cried out and Jesus stopped. He said, "Call him." Bartimaeus sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus learned a second

thing about Jesus: Jesus was attentive. He cares about individuals. Jesus is not only Lord of the universe, he is the lord of the sparrow. He sees and he cares. Jesus was attentive to Bartimaeus. He saw him, he sent for him. He sought to discern the great desire of Bartimaeus' heart.

And Bartimaeus learned a third thing about Jesus: Jesus is able. In Bartimaeus' case, Jesus was able to give him the gift of sight. How often people hesitate to ask God for help with a particular problem because they weren't sure that even God could solve that problem.

Doctors believe — 75 percent of them — that others' prayers can help a patient's recovery. Dr. Herbert Benson, author of *Timeless Healing* wrote: "We have seen that belief is powerful in conditions including angina pectoris, asthma, duodenal ulcers, congestive heart failure, diabetes, all forms of pain. We see it all the time."

We make a grave mistake if we leave God and religion out when fighting life's giants — whether these be health concerns, grief, family problems or whatever they may be. God is able.

Helen Keller was as blind as Bartimaeus. She never did see the light of day in this world. But she read widely and wrote eloquently. She graduated from the

prestigious Radcliffe College with degrees in English and German. She lectured, traveled extensively, visited military hospitals encouraging the wounded or disabled. In later years, Helen Keller said, "Thank God for my handicaps, for through them I have found myself, my work and my God."

Bartimaeus learned that the Lord is accessible, is attentive, is able.

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

### Daily Readings

Monday, October 30

Ephesians 4:32-5:8; Luke 13:10-17

Tuesday, October 31

Ephesians 5:21-33 or 5:2, 25-33;  
Luke 13:18-21

Wednesday, November 1

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14; 1 John 3:1-3;  
Matthew 5:1-12

Thursday, November 2

Daniel 12:13; Romans 6:3-9 or  
6:3-4, 8-9; John 6:37-40

Friday, November 3

Philippians 1:1-11; Luke 14:1-6

Saturday, November 4

Philippians 1:18-26; Luke 14:1, 7-11

## COURIER CLASSIFIEDS

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#### Announcements

**ADOPTIONS** The Catholic Courier does not publish adoption advertising. To obtain a list of agencies that serve birth mothers and adoptive parents, call 716-328-4340. Agencies wishing to be included on this list may send information to the Catholic Courier.

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