

COLUMNISTS

Pope's health spurs speculation on successor

Thanks to television, the whole world can see for itself the progressive, alarming deterioration of Pope John Paul II's health. He can no longer walk under his own power; his words are barely audible or intelligible; and his face continues to show the devastating effects of the Parkinson's disease that has racked his body and general well-being for the past few years.

There is widespread speculation now about the most likely successor. More than 120 cardinals under the age of 80 are currently eligible to vote in a conclave, but if the Holy Father continues to confound the predictions of the pope-watchers for a few more years, and if he does not create any new cardinals in the meantime, that number will have dwindled below the statutory limit of 120 by the time of the election.

After so long and dominant a pontificate as this one has been, it is most likely that the next conclave will want the church to take a breather, to allow the ecclesiastical dust to settle, so to speak, before proceeding to elect the real successor of John Paul II — someone, in other words, who might be young and vigorous enough to exercise the office in good health for at least 15 years or so.

This seems to be the moment for another transitional pope, someone to keep



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

the Chair of Peter warm without unduly disturbing the surrounding furniture. This would give the cardinals and other church leaders time to assess John Paul II's pontificate in a more measured fashion and decide upon the course the church should take in its aftermath — at the conclave following this one.

A transitional pontificate usually lasts no more than four to six years, which means that the one elected must be already in his 70s, preferably his mid-70s.

The cardinals are not likely to make a bold move in choosing, let us say, a black African or a French Jewish convert, when what is called for is a safe choice with a short term. The best guess is that the new pope will also be, once again, an Italian.

There are only a handful of Italian car-

dinals who might fit the bill. Mario Cé, patriarch of Venice, is already approaching 77. Carlo Martini is about to retire as Archbishop of Milan at age 75, but he is reported to have the onset of Parkinson's. Camillo Ruini, vicar general of Rome, is 71. Achille Silvestrini, 78, the former prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, would have been a logical consensus choice had John Paul II's pontificate ended two or three years ago. Angelo Sodano at 74 is the Secretary of State. Giacomo Biffi, also 74, is Archbishop of Bologna. He would be Opus Dei's ideal candidate, but would be blocked because of his extreme views.

There are three mentionable candidates still in their late 60s: Giovanni Battista Re, 68, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops; Severino Poletto, 69, Archbishop of Turin; and Dionigi Tettamanzi, 68, Archbishop of Genoa and formerly a professor of moral theology.

The best qualified is Cardinal Martini of Milan, but the chances of his election are slim to nil, given his outspoken, progressive views. Nevertheless, he enjoys widespread respect within the hierarchy for his pastoral vision and spirituality. He will surely be one of the grand electors in the conclave, that is, one of a tiny handful

of cardinals who will exert significant influence not only in directing votes toward particular candidates, but also in preventing the election of others, such as Cardinal Biffi, deemed theologically or psychologically unfit for the job.

Cardinals Aloisio Lorscheider of Brazil and Franz König of Austria were two of the most prominent grand electors at the second 1978 conclave that gave us John Paul II, and the late Cardinal Giovanni Benelli was the key factor in the election of John Paul I, who died after only 33 days in office.

Contrary to popular wisdom, the least likely outcome of the election is that the next pope will be a photocopy of the present pope because John Paul II has named more than 90 percent of the electors.

Humanly speaking, the papacy has survived as an institution over the course of so many centuries because it proceeds through history in a pendular rather than a linear fashion. Otherwise, it would have become steadily and increasingly reactionary and then off the rails entirely.

That has not happened, nor is it likely to happen this time around.

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

Correction

Our June 20 story "Courier wins awards at press convention" incorrectly stated that Karen M. Franz, the Courier's general manager/editor, had served as president of the Catholic Press Association of the United States and Canada from May, 2001, to May, 2002. Franz actually led the association for two years, beginning in May, 2000.

EDUCATION

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