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## Pope

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But this kind of letter also would raise ambiguities, because any resignation by the pope must be his own decision. He cannot be "resigned" by others.

"Who is going to say to him: 'Holy Father, you are now incapacitated.'? That's the problem," said Msgr. Charles Burns, a church historian who spent more than 25 years as an official of the Vatican Archives.

Church law explicitly allows for a pope to resign, but says the decision must be made freely and "duly manifested." Experts say this means in writing or with witnesses; ideally, it would be communicated to the College of Cardinals — although no one needs to formally accept a pope's resignation for it to be valid.

## Health concerns

Most Vatican officials agree that Pope John Paul has made his physical suffering an integral part of his papal ministry, giving his pontificate an added poignancy and a different kind of impact in recent years.

"The pope is operating under limitations that are visible to all. But he notes the big show of affection wherever he goes, and this encourages him," Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls said during a May trip to Bulgaria, where the pope moved and spoke with great difficulty during his public events.

More than on any previous journey, the pope's trip to Bulgaria and Azerbaijan marked a steep decline in his physical condition and especially in his ability to express himself.

Once known as the great communicator, the pope is finding his own powers of communication fast slipping away. The polyglot pontiff today has trouble making himself understood in any language.

When he addressed monks at the historic monastery in Rila, his voice projected so poorly that the microphone didn't pick it up. He sat bent over in a large white chair, chin on his chest, both hands shaking — and someone else quickly stepped in



Reuters/CNS

**A weary Pope John Paul II concentrates during an open-air Mass in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, May 26.**

to read the speech.

The effects of his illness have caused his speech to become less distinct and his movements unsteady. But during his visit to Bulgaria and Azerbaijan, the effects were dramatically visible to all. At one point, he apparently could not descend from his popemobile to lay a wreath at a statue of Sts. Cyril and Methodius.

For the first time, instead of walking down airplane steps, he was lowered to the tarmac in a "papal lift" behind the aircraft and out of sight of photographers. During events, he was rolled on a special wheeled platform or supported by two aides as he walked.

During this trip, there was also question whether the pope would be forced to cancel planned trips to Guatemala and Mexico after attending World Youth Day in Toronto July 23-29, ostensibly because of declining health and mobility. On June 18, the Vatican confirmed that the pope will indeed make his planned stops in Guatemala and Mexico, with one change to his planned activities: A beatification service in Mexico Aug. 1 will be a Liturgy of the Word ceremony, not a Mass.

On July 8, the pope transferred to his summer residence outside Rome for a quieter-than-usual stay before World Youth

Day.

In an apparent concession to his increasing frailty, the pontiff journeyed by car instead of helicopter to Castel Gandolfo, a papal estate that sits on a hill over a lake 13 miles southeast of Rome.

While at his summer residence, the pope's appointment book has been cleared of all private and special audiences, the Vatican said.

A Vatican press official told Catholic News Service this was the first time that he could recall that Pope John Paul had traveled to his summer villa by motorcade. The official speculated that the car would be more comfortable than the helicopter and did not involve climbing steps, which in recent months the pope has found increasingly difficult.

After his stay at Castel Gandolfo, the pope will arrive in Canada July 23, where he will spend more than half of his time resting at a Basilian-owned retreat center on Strawberry Island in Lake Simcoe, about 90 miles north of Toronto. After World Youth Day, he'll head to Guatemala July 29-30 to canonize Blessed Pedro de San Jose Betancur, and to Mexico July 30-Aug. 1 to canonize Blessed Juan Diego.

But there isn't much on the announced papal calendar after August — except for the Poland trip. And an expected trip to Croatia in September was recently scratched.

## Continued debate

Although many agree on the pope's courage in the face of physical trials, people at the Vatican and throughout the church appear divided on the resignation issue.

Cardinal Ratzinger said the pope has an "iron will" and is still able to manage church affairs. But "if he were to see that he absolutely could not (continue), then he certainly would resign," he said.

Honduran Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Tegucigalpa also said he was sure the pope would have the courage to resign if he believed that, for the good of the church, a healthier man were needed in the papacy.

Because the remarks by both cardinals were reported the same day, it came across in the media almost as a lobbying campaign. But like many things at the Vatican, it was less planned than it appeared; the cardinals were simply asked the question by reporters in separate interviews.

Others have voiced the opposite view. "The pope is not some kind of manager who, when he grows weak or sick, is set aside because he can't manage the interests of the company," said Krzysztof Zanussi, an award-winning Polish film director who currently is making a documentary on the pope.

Cardinal Joachim Meisner of Cologne, Germany, has rejected any speculation that the pope might resign as a result of ill health.

The cardinal told the Cologne newspaper, *Koelner Stadt-Anzeiger*, "I have spoken to the pope, and he told me that he would continue his service to the church 'until death do us part.'"

The last and perhaps the only pope who voluntarily resigned was St. Celestine V, who abdicated in 1294 after only four months in office. In more recent times, Msgr. Burns said, there was evidence to suggest that Pope Pius XII had left instructions that, if the Nazis arrested him during World War II, the College of Cardinals was to consider him resigned and elect a new pope.

Health questions are trickier, but have been overcome by previous pontiffs. Pope Clement XII became totally blind in 1732, and in later years conducted audiences and ran the church's affairs from his bed.

Church historians have sometimes marveled that modern popes have escaped the kind of serious mental deterioration often endured by the elderly.

"We've been spared that. We've been spared an awful lot," said Msgr. Burns. He and several other Vatican officials emphasized that Pope John Paul's problems are physical, not mental.

"He seems to be sharp as a tack. Maybe the day will come when he gives a big sigh and says, 'I just can't do it any longer.' But at the moment he's still determined to continue," he said.

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