

A resilient John Paul celebrates 24 years

John Paul II marked his 24th anniversary as pope on Oct. 16. Elected at 58, he was relatively young and exceptionally vigorous, an avid hiker, mountain-climber, skier and swimmer.

The attempt on his life in St. Peter's Square in 1981 was a major setback, but he recovered surprisingly well and functioned with few visible effects into the early 1990s.

In 1992, however, he had colon surgery for the removal of a tumor. The following year he dislocated his shoulder in a fall, and the year after that, he broke his femur in another fall. Two years later he had an appendectomy.

Throughout this same period, signs of a neurological condition, Parkinson's disease, began to appear. The two falls may have been related to it. Although the Vatican at first rejected such speculation, the symptoms became so pronounced that few officials any longer bothered to deny it.

John Paul II is the fourth-longest-reigning pope in history, surpassing Pius VII (1800-1823), who served for 23 years, four months and just over two weeks, and Hadrian I (772-795), who reigned for 23 years, 10 months and two weeks.

If John Paul II should remain in office through the third week in April, he will have exceeded the tenure of Pius VI (1775-1799) — 24 years, six months and just over a week.

Only two popes would be ahead of him in length of ser-



Father Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

vice: Leo XIII (1878-1903), pope for 25 years and five months (so long that one cardinal was heard to say, "I thought we elected a Holy Father, not an Eternal Father"), and the longest-reigning Pius IX (1846-1878), in office for 31 years, seven months and three weeks.

These longest-reigning popes' tenures were back to back, spanning slightly more than 57 years — June 16, 1846, to July 20, 1903.

Longevity is of less consequence than quality of service. John XXIII was pope for less than five years, but many would rate him the most significant pope of modern times and the most beloved pope in church history. Among his greatest achievements: the convening of the Second Vatican Council and the creation of a whole new style for the papacy itself.

John Paul II continues to be a dominant world and church presence. In spite of advanced age and health problems, he persists in his efforts to reach out to the global community for which he feels a special pastoral responsibility. He is the most traveled pope in history, and one wonders how any future pope could

possibly exceed his record.

However, the substantive contributions of his pontificate were in place five years ago. The exceptions were Jubilee Year 2000, with the extraordinarily moving service of repentance in St. Peter's Basilica in which he begged the forgiveness of various groups for the transgressions of the church, and his remarkable trip to the Holy Land with prayers and gestures at the Wailing Wall and in Yad Vashem, Jerusalem's Holocaust memorial.

It is for good reason that the worldwide Jewish community has such a positive attitude toward this pope.

Unfortunately, the waning days of his pontificate have been marred by the sexual-abuse crisis in the priesthood — a crisis that is global in scope. How it will finally be played out, and how history will judge John Paul II's leadership in its face are not questions to which answers readily suggest themselves. Only time will tell.

Meanwhile, there is more discussion today about whether the pope will resign or who his most likely successors might be than about any of his present and future initiatives. Whether this is indicative of anything in particular, it does remind us again that length of years is not as important for any of us as their quality and lasting impact.

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

Poor woman offered Jesus royal greeting

To the editor:

A few weeks ago I was enjoying an episode of "Mother Angelica Live" on the Catholic television network EWTN.

Father Mitch Pacwa hosted Wednesday's show and his special guest was a bishop from Peru who delighted his audience with songs and stories of his time doing missionary work in Peru for over 40 years. He was genuinely in love with the people there and the amazing thing about this bishop was his continued youthfulness and apostolic zeal, which he attributes to his time spent in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. A story that he shared touched my heart, which led me to write this letter.

One day he was bringing Communion to a poor Indian woman whose home was quite a distance away in the hills. In order to enter the home he had to bend over to get through the doorway. The description of the home was sketchy but I envisioned a crude dwelling place with dirt floors. Upon passing through the doorway he noticed rose petals on the floor and as he proceeded farther down the hallway toward the woman's room again he noticed rose petals. When he entered the room to distribute communion to the sick woman he inquired about the rose petals. She responded that they were placed there in anticipation and preparation for the arrival of Our Lord in

the Holy Eucharist. What a lovely, lovely notion. How blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God!

I wonder, how do we recognize the true presence of Our Lord in the Holy Eucharist and in what ways do we prepare ourselves to receive him through this Holy Sacrament? I also wonder what country needs missionary work more? Thank you EWTN for providing quality Catholic programs that touch the heart, mind and soul.

Janice J. Armstrong
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 Churchville

Absent proof, seek the truth

To the editor:

In response to Ms. Fredericks' letter printed September 26 ("Society, not church, changed sexual norms"), I again pose the question from my letter which she did not address: How could she, a physician, state that there is "medical truth" of no genetic link to a homosexual orientation, without supporting medical evidence?

I concede that I used an outdated catechism in my quote that said homosexuals do not choose their orientation. As Ms. Fredericks explained, this was deleted because, "There is no legitimate proof ..." That was the point of my letter. Without proof, no one has the right to substitute personal ideas for truth, as she did.

Many in the Church seek the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to shed light on the subject of homosexuality. Some try to suppress truth. When people cite the "sins of homosexuality" but do not mention that the Church considers acts, not homosexuality itself, a sin, it is offensive. A 13-year-old homosexual girl who has never participated in a homosexual act is not a sinner due to her homosexuality.

Galileo spoke a truth that the Church was certain was wrong. In God's time truth was revealed and the Church corrected itself. I do

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