

# Labeling the pope not a simple task

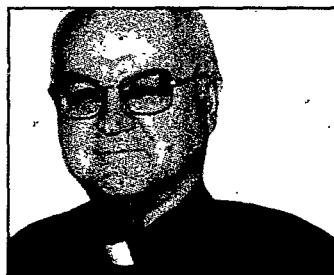
In April, John Paul II became the third-longest-reigning pope in history by surpassing Pius VI, who reigned for 24 years, six months, and one week (1775-1799). If John Paul II lives beyond mid-March 2004, he will become the second-longest-reigning pope. He is now closing in on Leo XIII, who was in office for 25 years and five months (1878-1903).

If he lived another seven years, John Paul II, then 90, would surpass Pius IX, who occupied the Chair of Peter for 31 years, seven months and three weeks (1846-1878), and become the longest-reigning pope ever.

Despite his medical condition, that's not an impossibility. One of the heroes of the Second Vatican Council, Cardinal Franz Koenig of Austria, is 97 and still utterly clear of mind. It was Koenig, in fact, who had much to do with the current pope's election in 1978.

Those were the days of the Iron Curtain, when the Soviet Empire was at full strength. The church behind that curtain was often referred to as "the church of silence," which it was, though not by choice.

Koenig and others, especially from Central Europe, were convinced that the church behind the Iron Curtain needed a strong voice to speak on its behalf, someone like Krakow's Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, who had experienced life under a communist regime and knew how to deal with it.



**Father Richard McBrien**

Essays in Theology

That bloc of cardinals joined forces with those from Third World countries who had been impressed with Wojtyla's obvious sensitivity to the poor and the powerless of the world.

When the Italian cardinals could not agree upon a candidate, the electors turned for the first time in four-and-a-half centuries to two non-Italian finalists: Karol Wojtyla of Poland and Johannes Willebrands of the Netherlands. When the latter recognized that the momentum had shifted in Wojtyla's favor, he urged his supporters to vote for Wojtyla.

Only the ultra-conservative cardinals — supporters of Cardinal Giuseppe Siri of Genoa — refused to make the election unanimous, even after it was clear that Wojtyla had been elected.

In the minds of many progressive Catholics, the current pontificate has been too authoritarian in governing style and too narrow in its theological and pastoral policies, especially in the matter of appointments to the hierarchy. But

what happened at the 1978 conclave that elected John Paul II should give pause to those who view him as an ultra-conservative.

Would an ultra-conservative have convened the celebrated 1986 Assisi assembly of various religious leaders to pray together for peace, much to the chagrin of Vatican officials to the pope's right?

Would an ultra-conservative have publicly asked forgiveness for the church's sins against various communities, including the Jews?

Would an ultra-conservative have bestowed pectoral crosses on the Archbishop of Canterbury and several other Anglican bishops and invited them to process with him in full episcopal regalia on the occasion of the celebration of the 1,400th anniversary of the re-Christianizing of England under Gregory the Great?

And, more recently, would an ultra-conservative pope have urged his fellow Poles to vote for Poland's entrance into the European Union when many genuinely ultra-conservative Polish clergy were denouncing the Union for its stances on abortion, gay rights, divorce and premarital sex?

Labels can be misleading, no matter who applies them.

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

## Proposes alternatives on cathedral

To the editor:

The continuing saga of the landmark status of Sacred Heart Cathedral begs a major question. What is the real reason why this church was designated the cathedral? We know that after the demolition of the old St. Patrick's Cathedral — itself built as a parish church — that Sacred Heart Church became a "pro-cathedral," and then later was elevated to cathedral status. There were and are other notable churches that could have been chosen, but why this one? Church politics? Size? Nice neighborhood? A well-connected monsignor or resident? Its awe-inspiring majesty?

Consider one negative feature: its location, tucked away in a neighborhood of the 10th Ward, quite inaccessible. A more centrally located church would have been better — say "Old" St. Mary's downtown, or maybe St. Joseph's (now demolished).

Could there be "co-cathedrals," notable churches in the diocese that would serve as cathedral as occasions warrant? Then there'd be money to preserve and protect them and maintain our heritage.

Since landmark status is apparently doomed, perhaps the advocates could start a campaign to make it a Basilica (Major or Minor). Then they could see if the Vatican really thinks this is a notable and historic church building. Maybe it

can happen — after the renovations.

Don Muench  
Smallwood Drive  
Pittsford

## Inform public about surgery

To the editor:

I would like to respond to the letter to the editor (June 19: "Says surgery is immoral") concerning circumcision. I am not aware of any Catholic doctrine that implies it is needed. Indeed St. Paul defended the rights of the gentile converts in stating that they did not have to become circumcised in order to be Christian.

The letter referred to a court case in which William Stowell filed suit against the Catholic hospital where he was circumcised. The writer implies that the circumcision was the decision of the attending physician.

Having had two sons of my own and being a registered nurse, I know that there is no way that a circumcision is done without the signed permission of the child's parents. Indeed no treatment can be given to a minor child without parental consent save in their absence in life-threatening situations. My question on first perusal of the article is whether or not Mr. Stowell first sued his parents for giving that permission.

Secondly, the writer stated that no national medical group in the world today recommends routine circumcision. I wholly agree, but the operative word in that statement is "today." The case in point occurred in 1981 when conventional practice and wisdom was supportive of routine circumcision.

The point I am trying to make is that all that parents and physicians have to work with is the knowledge and the training that they have at the present time. To be sued for an action that was standard practice 22 years ago is to tie physicians' hands for fear that today's treatment will be considered in error and therefore

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