

Pope's resignation would be act of love

In January 1998, I submitted an op-ed piece to *The New York Times* on papal resignation. It was not accepted for publication.

Pope John Paul II had already been wracked with Parkinson's disease, been near death after an assassination attempt, been operated on for a stomach tumor and sustained serious injuries in a fall.

I pointed out that the Catholic Church was about to enter a period that would be exceedingly dangerous to its institutional well-being.

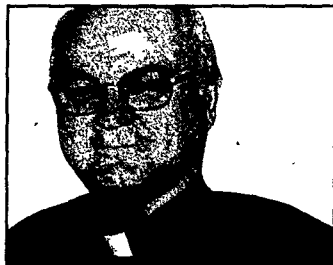
The almost absolute power of the papacy had already been shifting gradually to a small clique, within the Vatican, supported by well-known ultra-conservative movements within the church.

Even Cardinal Ratzinger was said to have remarked privately that the pope had become "the prisoner of *Opus Dei*."

I urged in the op-ed piece that, for the good of the church, John Paul II should follow the example of four (possibly six) popes (the last in 1415) and voluntarily resign to allow a healthier person to take the helm of the barque of Peter.

Given modern medical technology, John Paul II had the possibility of living many more years, but in what condition?

If his physical and mental powers are eventually robbed by Parkinson's disease, who in the Vatican will decide, and when, that the pope can no longer func-



Father Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

tion?

There has been a rumor for some years that the pope submitted a provisional letter of resignation to Cardinal Sodano, Vatican secretary of state, just in case, but who can execute such a document if the pope is unable to do so himself?

The Code of Canon Law, revised in 1983 with John Paul II's direct involvement and approval, makes no provision for a situation in which a pope becomes mentally incompetent or lapses into a coma.

Nor is there any check on those who might be tempted to exercise the highest authority of the church on behalf of a pope who would be completely unaware of decisions taken in his name.

I wrote back then, that if John Paul II were to resign while fully capable of making a rational and conscientious decision, he could assume a place among the truly great popes of history.

But if he should fail to take this courageous step and remain in office after his physical and mental powers have given out, the

church would become a rudderless ship, with unelected and unaccountable second- and third-level officers vying for control.

"This remarkable, deeply spiritual man," I concluded, "more than most of his fellow humans, knows that no one, not even a pope, is indispensable."

In January, 2000, I submitted a longer article to *The Tablet* of London, arguably the best English-language Catholic journal in the world. That, too, was not accepted, the editor being concerned that it might "strike a false note."

What he undoubtedly meant was that, whenever

anyone even hints that the pope might be nearing the end of his pontificate, the proverbial roof falls in on them, even on high-ranking cardinals who recently expressed frank views about the pope's state of health only to be forced to deny that they ever made such a statement or to explain that it had only been "philosophical."

Although the time may have passed when a resignation would have a great spiritual impact, it is not too late to save the church from the dangers of administrative chaos.

It would be his final act of love and concern for the church that he has served so faithfully over so many years.

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

LETTERS

Wasn't drive responsibility of everyone?

To the editor:

We have just finished the Partners in Faith campaign at St. Jude parish. During this 12-week period, I have observed the actions of people who pride themselves in belonging to a "traditional" or "conservative" Catholic parish where there are daily Masses, missions and novenas, a strong education program, statues in the church, and other wonderful experiences in line with the Pope and magisterium. St. Jude parish is a welcome refuge in a world that has lost most respect for life and has grown more secular.

My thoughts at the beginning of the campaign were that this was an easily attainable goal for such a faith-filled community. So how did we respond to this call from God? Only 20 percent of the 1,200 parishioners of St. Jude contributed toward the \$475,000 goal. Of the remaining, 62 percent said no and the remaining 17 percent wouldn't respond. In other words, 79 percent of my brothers and sisters in Christ felt that it was not their responsibility or completely impossible for them to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, give shelter to the homeless, instruct the ignorant, clothe the naked, or partake in the other good works that will be accomplished by these funds. If all of these folks only contributed \$1 per month, the community could have received an ad-

ditional \$35,000 of services!

For those who contributed to the Bishop's call for help, God will most certainly bless you abundantly for the relief you brought to the needy in our community. For those who felt that it wasn't their responsibility, I ask you to reflect on the possibility that this was a personal "test" from God to see if you really live the works of mercy Jesus commanded us to perform. Did you pass?

Thomas Horan
Davy Drive
Rochester

Incomplete, not 'inferior'

To the editor:

Having appreciated Father Shamon's columns over the years, I must admit I was taken aback by a comment in his last piece where he refers to marital intimacy as an "... inferior reflection of the intimacy we all long for with God." As a married man committed to the Sacrament of Marriage, I was perplexed in hearing that the many varied forms of intimacy within a sacramental union were considered inferior, especially since I consider some, if not all, of those times as manifestations of God's love and union expressed through and with my partner, my child, and my daily activities as a husband and father.

My wife also has spoken of those sublime moments where she felt truly touched by God — the first time she held our son stands out as a "marker" that will endure forever in our lifetime and perhaps beyond. So for these to be considered common or second class or of mediocre quality as the word inferior suggests, was quite a surprise.

However, as a couple trying to live the contemplative dimension of the Gospel, we see how these experiences can reveal a relationship much deeper and satisfying than we thought possible. Father Thomas Keating, co-founder of Contemplative Outreach and a pioneer in the development of centering prayer, aptly explains:

"It's a pro and the ta God can c into ever intimacy th inconceiv beginning thing, as F imagine c closeness ence."

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To the edit

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