

Media asks about the pope — Part I

In recent weeks I have had so many phone calls from the media regarding Pope John Paul II that my assistant has had to advise reporters to send their questions via e-mail, without any promises about my replying before their deadlines.

This column and the next assumes that readers might be interested in the sorts of questions that the media have been asking.

One batch of questions related to the pope's health: Has his Parkinson's disease impaired his ability to effectively lead the church? Yes. How about in the last two years? It is a progressively debilitating disease, so it is only logical that he would have become more impaired with the passage of time.

Has the pope's obvious frailty during public appearances undermined confidence in his abilities? For many, yes; for others, no. If my own limited experience is an accurate indicator of sentiment, more are distressed than inspired.

How much is the pope running the church now and how much is he an instrument of the Curia? No realist can believe that he is "running" the church on a day-to-day basis. On the other hand, it is not the Roman Curia, but a relatively small group of powerful figures who are determining policy and acting in the pope's name.

Has the Vatican properly handled public disclosure of



Father Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

his health problems? No. There is an old saying in the church: "The only time one is certain of having an accurate report of a pope's health is when the Vatican announces his death."

Why doesn't the pope retire? He may believe that he has an obligation, a duty, to remain in his post for as long as God gives him life. A plausible, less pious, reason is that those closest to him would lose their power the moment he retired, and so they keep assuring him that he is indispensable.

What worries you most about the present situation regarding the pope's health? If he were to lapse into a coma or otherwise lose his physical and mental capacity to function, he would remain pope as long as he is still biologically alive. The Code of Canon Law, revised in 1983, makes no provision for the transfer of authority in this situation. Others would presume to act in the pope's name, indeed as a matter of necessity.

Another cluster of questions pertained to his place in history: As one who has

written about the lives of the popes, how does this pope stand out? He is historically important for being the first non-Italian pope in four-and-a-half centuries, for having had the third-longest pontificate in history and for having helped to accelerate the implosion of "the Soviet empire."

What have you most admired about his leadership? One must distinguish between his leadership toward the world community and within the church itself. Regarding the former, John Paul II has been a prophetic spokesman for human rights, social justice and peace, and would have been deserving of this year's Nobel Peace Prize. He has also been the voice of the world's poor and powerless.

Regarding the latter, he has governed the church in a hard-line, even autocratic, fashion, brooking no dissent and recentralizing authority in the Vatican, to the detriment of the Second Vatican Council's doctrine of collegiality. He has also made some extraordinarily poor appointments to and promotions within the hierarchy.

Indeed, one hears frequently that, in the next conclave, no one will get elected who fails to promise to control the Curia and accord more respect for the pastoral authority of the bishops.

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

Columns are timeless gift

To the editor:

On Sunday Oct. 19 my wife Millie and I bumped into Father Albert Shamon in Auburn's Wendy's Restaurant. We were on our way home from the Syracuse Airport following our trip to Korea to visit our son who is serving our country in the United States Army. Even though Father had several others at his table I boldly walked over and jokingly asked him who gave him permission to retire. With his amiable and infectious smile he assured me that it is true, that his pen has been retired. All of those with him agreed that his pen may be retired but his writings should not be allowed to fade off in the distance in some dusty corner.

Father Shamon's writings are timeless and universal. He addresses those important topics that truly mean something in our Catholic lives. He has that keen insight to get to the heart of the matter and present it meaningfully to us. His nearly 40 years of presentations should not be allowed to disappear. The *Courier* should do as they do on TV — give us and those of our younger generation "re-runs" to continue to grace our *Courier* as Father's words continue to teach and encourage us.

Father Shamon is a gifted, beloved and well-known local priest who has captured the hearts and guided the lives of untold numbers of Rochester Diocesans. The *Courier* would be remiss in

letting this gift pass. Certainly the *Courier* has the capability to categorize and build a file of his works and could continue to reproduce them in our *Courier* — sort of "Father always said this." His themes are always "timely" and mean so much. They are down to earth and truly strike home to all of us readers.

Gerard J. Messmer, Jr.
 Burdick Road
 Interlaken

Heirs already in our midst

To the editor:

Bishop Clark, in his October 16 "Along the Way" article in the *Courier*, recalled his presence in Rome on October 16, 1978 — the day that Karol Wojtyla was elected and became Pope John Paul II.

In the same issue, Cindy Wooden's article, "Pope to beatify Mother Teresa," reminds us of Teresa's work and holiness while she labored — in Christ's name — among the desperately poor in the slums of India.

Where are the next Karol Wojtylas and Mother Teresas?

Remember God's promise, "I will not leave you orphans!"

I believe that they are among us now — unknown perhaps, even to themselves. I believe that they are with us today and will gradually feel and recognize God's calling to his Divine service — as others have before them. We will know them by their commitment, works and example. We will thank God for their presence — as we do now for the gift of our present day priests, nuns and other religious workers who labor in God's vineyard.

Richard B. Blankfield
 Nichols Street
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Synod goal needs work

To the editor:

I spend a lot of time trying to set the record straight. Usually it's about women

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