

# Did Peter have the longest papal reign?

On March 16 Pope John Paul II's papacy will equal and then surpass that of Leo XIII who had been in office exactly 25 years and five months. There is a question, however, whether the current pope will become the second- or third-longest reigning pope.

Ever since John Paul II surpassed Pius VI (1775-99) last April, this column has consistently referred to the present pontificate as the third-longest. However, the media and various Catholic sources have been referring to John Paul II as the fourth-longest reigning pope.

The difference in ranking has everything to do with St. Peter and the length of his own ministry as shepherd of the universal church.

The Catholic Encyclopedia indicates that St. Peter's term extended from the year 32 to the year 67 — 35 years. But it is impossible to give precise dates for Jesus' original commissioning of Peter ("Thou art Peter ...") and for Peter's death. Even the Vatican's official yearbook acknowledges that Peter may have died in the year 64 rather than 67.

If Peter had been martyred in the year 64, his reign would have been 32 years, assuming that his pontificate began in the year 32.

Significantly, the Vatican's official yearbook does not provide a date for the beginning of Peter's reign and allows for a possible three-year hiatus between Peter's



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death (if in 64) and the beginning of his first successor's reign, that of Linus (67-76, according to the yearbook's reckoning).

A second problem with the assumption that St. Peter had the longest papal reign is that it sidesteps certain other questions: (1) Is not the pope the earthly head of the universal church because he is the Bishop of Rome? (2) And, if every pope is the successor of Peter, can Peter himself be considered a pope?

From the church's beginnings, the pope is the head of the universal church because of his election as Bishop of Rome, the church's primate see. A pope could be the bishop of some other diocese but thus far no one has become pope except by virtue of his election as Bishop of Rome.

Was Peter himself ever the Bishop of Rome? There is no evidence that he was. The local church of Rome was founded almost two decades before Peter reached the city. St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, written in the mid-50s, makes no

reference to Peter.

The concept of "bishop" in those early years was different from our own. Rome was probably ruled by a council of senior ministers. The earliest popes, like Linus and Clement, were probably the head of the council of elders or, as in Clement's case, the official representative of the Roman church to other Christian churches.

More significantly, the earliest lists of popes did not even include Peter. Being considered successors of Peter, Linus was first on the earliest lists of popes.

Out of respect for the unique status of St. Peter in the history of the church and its papacy, it would seem more appropriate not to include him in any rankings of popes.

It is for such reasons that this column refers to John Paul II as the third-longest reigning pope in history.

To be sure, none of these considerations challenges the Catholic Church's official teaching that Jesus declared Peter to be the "rock" upon which the church was to be built (Matthew 16:18) and that he conferred upon Peter the power of the keys.

The Petrine ministry, as exercised by Peter and his successors, remains an essential ministry in service to the unity and spiritual well-being of the universal church.

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Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

## Agrees on retirement

### To the editor:

With all due respect to Pope John Paul, I believe that Father Richard McBrien is correct that the pope has suffered enough and probably should resign. The pope has done many wonderful things, including his help with the collapse of Communism and his improved relations with other religions. But because of his current condition, he has become less effective in running the church. The poor man has suffered a great deal.

Who is really running the Catholic Church now?

My hope for the next pope would be more like Pope John, one that would open the window a little wider and allow some more "Fresh Air" to come into the church. My pope would fully implement the changes made by Vatican II and would run the church less like a kingdom.

Like Barbara Bush (*Catholic Courier*, Dec. 4), I love to read Father McBrien's columns first because I find them informative, refreshing and stimulating. I hope that you will run them for as long as he can write!

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unfortunate death. His columns were the best part of reading the *Catholic Courier* and they were the last thing I read, so that they would be the thing I most remembered. They were like a dessert to savor all week long. I was very sad to learn that he would be discontinuing them and even sadder to learn of his recent death. There was a void left in my — and I'm sure, many others' — heart and soul. I don't look forward to reading the *Courier* as I used to.

I would like to add my voice to Mr. Messmer's and also combine it with Donald Copenhagen's request ("DIY, Father!" Nov. 20) that Father McBrien do all Catholics a favor and resign. We don't need any more of Father McBrien's "Pope-bashing" and liberal viewpoints meant only to cause dissension in the Church. We get enough of that in the secular press and don't need to see it on a regular basis in the *Courier*.

I would like to see the *Courier* drop Father McBrien's "Essays in Theology" column and start re-running Father Shamon's columns from the beginning. They are indeed timeless and we have a lot to learn from them. This would be a wonderful tribute to Father Shamon and a gift to your readers.

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