

Title: **Papal term limits? Give it some thought**

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Most observers of John Paul II don't expect him to resign the papacy. Still, many have an opinion about it. Some have commented on his dedication and willingness to suffer for the church he loves. Others have said that having a leader who is so physically debilitated is pathetic, and that this may make people--whether Catholic or not--wonder why the institution allows him to continue in office.

Many who watch the pope struggle to perform his duties feel a deep sympathy for him, both because of his physical condition and also out of an admiration for his courage, persistence, and dedication. Even so, those who admire these qualities must admit that the pope's diminished physical capacity raises questions about how long he can, or should, continue to serve.

Part of the difficulty with John Paul's declining health is not simply his Parkinson's disease, but the public style of his long papacy. Because John Paul has been so visible, it is impossible for him to slip out of sight at the end of his reign. Even now, he chooses to remain in the public eye, although it is painfully obvious that he no longer has the stamina to perform all his duties, even ceremonial ones. There is nothing implicitly problematic when someone else reads his homilies. Still, the pope's difficulties have caused observers to wonder who is writing his homilies, as well as other official Vatican documents issued in his name.

While many opinions have been voiced on the pope's possible retirement, two deserve particular attention. One argues that the pope should serve until death. The other is that he should serve until he is no longer capable of leading the church. Neither of these views is persuasive. With recent advances in medicine, longevity has increased, sometimes accompanied by good health and mental acuity, but often not. Advanced medical care may keep someone alive into his ninth decade, but the person usually functions at a diminished level. In this case, for one to serve as pope until death means that, in the final years of a papacy, the church will be directly overseen not by the pope himself but by Vatican bureaucrats. This has already happened under John Paul II, who, officials admit, has reduced the number of hours he works. The second option, in which a pope serves until he deems that he is no longer capable of doing so, leaves open the possibility that he may not recognize that he can no longer carry out his duties.

Many compare the pope's commitment to the church to the commitment of marriage that binds "until death do us part." This sacramental spirituality functions in marriage, but does it work for the papacy? Marriage is between two persons. The papacy not only unites the pope with the church but also empowers him, as the first among equals, to lead the church. That leadership requires not only a deep spiritual commitment but also the ability to manage a complex global organization.

In an article in the Washington Post ("A Crossroad for the Catholic Church," February 3, 2003), George Weigel noted that most people think of the pope not as the CEO of the Catholic Church, but, above all, as a religious presence and moral witness. While this may be so, the pope also has the responsibility of managing the affairs of the church, and John Paul II is hardly well enough to shoulder those responsibilities.

Such circumstances are not unprecedented, of course, as the health of many popes has declined in their twilight years. But though John Paul's predecessors could take refuge in the inner sanctum of the Vatican, it will be harder for him to do so. One advantage he has over his predecessors is unparalleled health care. Doesn't that fact argue that the cardinals should consider instituting a plan for the retirement of future popes? Medicine may allow all of us (at least those with the financial means) to live longer, but it cannot ensure that such longevity will be vigorous and unimpaired.

Historically, several popes have abdicated. The last to do so was Gregory XII, in 1415. He promised his electors that he would step down to resolve the Great Western Schism. Bishops are required by canon law to submit their resignations at age seventy-five, but they may continue to serve if the pope asks them to stay. Canon 401 [section] 2 of the Code of Canon Law states: "A diocesan bishop is earnestly requested to present his resignation from office when he becomes less able to fulfill his office due to ill health or another serious reason." This makes sense. Even when bishops retain clarity of mind, often they do not have the energy of their younger years--a key requirement for fulfilling the job's responsibilities. Cardinals eighty and older are not permitted to vote for the next pope. John Paul II celebrated his eighty-fourth birthday in May. He is now well past the age when all bishops but Rome's must submit their resignations.

Interestingly, John Paul approved the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law, which allows a pope to resign (canon 332). The optimum time for the church to discuss the possible resignation of the pope would be during an interregnum--after a pope's death and before the cardinals elect his successor. By discussing these issues when no one holds the office, the cardinals could act independently of the politics of the papal election and, one hopes, without prejudice to the pope's successor. Some cardinals, notably Belgian cardinal Godfried Danneels, have already indicated that the time for a discussion of papal term limits is due. He's right. It may be time to require that a future pontiff who reaches the age of eighty be required to resign. This would also act as a term limit on the papacy, which may serve the church, and the pope, well. Old age is one thing; ill health is another. When combined, they may take a serious toll on both the pope and the church.

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