

John Paul's Weakening Raises Again Questions About the Institution of Lifetime Papal Reign

By PETER STEINFELS

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BELIEFS

"We know who's in the driver's seat, but we're not always sure whose hand is on the steering wheel."

For a number of years, many Roman Catholic leaders, observing the unrelenting decline of Pope John Paul II, have been quietly expressing sentiments like that. In this case, the remark was made just over a year ago, during a strictly social dinner in Rome. The speaker was a priest, a scholar who has spent most of his working life in the precincts of the Vatican and whose knowledge and judgment are often relied upon by Vatican officials.

His expression of skepticism about who was actually steering the world's largest religious body may have been uncalled for, but the very fact that someone so familiar with the inner circles of Catholic governance could entertain these doubts points to a problem widely recognized but only obliquely discussed.

It may be even harder to discuss at a time when attention is naturally focused on the pope's continuing battle with his accumulating frailties, his struggle, quite literally, to breathe. Isn't it unseemly to interrupt the faithful's prayers for the papal person to raise issues about papal procedures?

A few days before that Roman dinner conversation, people filing into the weekly papal audience in the Paul VI Auditorium near St. Peter's Basilica were greeted by scenes from Lourdes, the shrine in the French Pyrenees where pilgrims seeking healing had gone for over a century. In 2004, Lourdes was the site of a World Day of the Sick, held on Feb. 11, the date on which the Blessed Virgin was reported to have appeared in 1858 to a 14-year-old peasant girl.

When he was wheeled onto the stage that day in Rome, John Paul was able to deliver a brief message to mark the event in Lourdes, speaking eloquently although not very clearly, at least to non-Italian ears, about the meaning of suffering.

His reflections gained emphasis, of course, from his own diminished state: with each setback, the observation that his very appearance preaches a kind of bodily sermon about suffering is made more frequently. But a year ago, his remarks also referred to a document on suffering he had issued exactly 20 years earlier, on Feb. 11, 1984, shortly after his Christmas-week prison visit to the man, Mehmet Ali Agca, who had tried to assassinate him.

That 1984 document, "Salvifici Doloris" ("On the Salvific Meaning of Suffering"), is a Christian challenge to much that the modern world takes for granted about suffering - and yet, as he made clear last year, by no means a rejection of modernity's gains. In his World Day of the Sick message, he hailed all those who "take their place beside the sick," who alleviate suffering and when possible provide cure, "thanks to the progress of the art of medicine." He mentioned scientists and researchers alongside doctors, nurses, hospital chaplains and volunteers.

Much less prominent that day was another brief papal statement at the audience. Feb. 11, 2004, was also the 75th anniversary of the Lateran Pacts, which finally resolved the dispute between the church and Italy over the latter's seizure of the papal states in the course of Italian unification in the 19th century.

The pope and the Vatican marked this event only in positive terms. Italian papers carried more complex analyses, balancing the trade-offs between the healing of a deep national breach and the guarantees of Vatican independence, on the one hand, and the prestige that the church's settlement had unfortunately lent to Mussolini and his Fascist regime, on the other.

The anniversary of the Lateran Pacts was a reminder of the other dimensions of papal leadership: the pope as diplomat, as world actor, as steward of a vast, diverse and in many ways seriously divided Catholic people - in sum, the pope as moral guide by means of policy and institutional direction and not only by means of personal example and theological messages.

Those are some of the dimensions that a pontiff as weakened as the one who appeared at the audience a year ago, let alone the one now back in Gemelli Hospital, seems scarcely equipped to handle.

Two years ago, it was suggested in this column that a pope who had proved himself to be simultaneously such a conservative and such an innovator as John Paul II might make a final gift to the future Catholic Church by setting a retirement age for popes, just as one now exists for other bishops; or by setting a papal term of office, or by simply enacting in a contemporary, voluntary form the practice of papal retirement.

Those are complicated proposals. They raise many legitimate arguments pro and con. If a pope were to retire, resign or come to the end of a term of office, would he be able to influence the choice of his successor unduly? Could he become a rallying point for schism among those who might not like his successor's policies? Would the presence of a former pope (or two) reduce the aura that now surrounds the person as well as the office, and would that be a good thing or a bad thing?

The time for this pope to deal with questions like those, even if he wanted to, is almost certainly past. They are not the kind of delicate matters to be considered when even faithful, knowledgeable Catholic theologians in Rome are wondering whose hands are really on the steering wheel when the pope is in the driver's seat.

They are questions that could be taken on by a successor, however, who might possibly make changes in church law accordingly, though only if he did so early enough in his papacy so that his actions would not be suspected of ulterior purposes. Of course that means that even now, church leaders should be floating ideas like a papal term of 12 years, an obligatory retirement age of 85 or a dozen other variations.

Would thinking such once unthinkable thoughts be a betrayal of the remarkable man now in Gemelli Hospital? Not long ago, it was similarly unthinkable that a non-Italian, especially one from a Communist nation, would become pope, or that a pope would make more than a hundred trips outside Italy, traveling the equivalent of more than three times to the moon. When it comes to changing rules, hasn't the man in Gemelli Hospital actually led the way?