

New challenges for church

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When a leading Belgian cardinal, Godfried Danneels, called for debate about papal age limits several years ago, he stood alone among top-ranked church officials.

But that is changing against the backdrop of Pope John Paul II's growing debility and worries about a rudderless Roman Catholic Church.

"Cardinal Danneels is certainly not the only cardinal who thinks that way now," said the Rev. Keith Pecklers, a Jesuit priest and professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. "It would not surprise me at all to see this on the agenda of the next pontificate."

John Paul's latest health scare has not only reignited debate about a mandatory retirement age for popes, but it also has spotlighted questions about what the church would do if the ailing 84-year-old pontiff were to become permanently incapacitated.

"The concern is that modern medicine may keep the body alive long after the mind is capable of functioning," said the Rev. Thomas Reese, a leading Vatican scholar. "Popes can have strokes. They can go into comas. They can suffer from Alzheimer's disease. What do we do if that happens?"

No one really knows.

While church law sets out elaborate provisions for a pope's death, it is silent on questions of incapacitation. And though John Paul is reportedly on the mend from the breathing crisis that sent him to a hospital, church watchers worry that it's only a matter of time before an episode occurs from which he cannot fully recover.

"The U.S. Constitution has the 25th Amendment that tells us what to do if the president becomes disabled," said Reese, the author of books on church governance. "But the Catholic Church has nothing like that."

The church, of course, would go on if the pope became incapacitated. A large Vatican bureaucracy, which runs the day-to-day business of the church, has always rolled along through papal illnesses and deaths. But only a pope can appoint bishops, or make pronouncements with the mantle of infallibility -- powers that he retains until his death. And while a pope may resign, few believe that John Paul would ever consider such an option because of his belief that he is God's representative on Earth.

"This is a man with such a profound sense of destiny that his resignation is out of the question," said the Rev. John Jay Hughes, a church historian.

But despite his Herculean will to carry on, critics say John Paul is playing a diminishing role.

"The reality is that he's not in charge and hasn't been for some time," said Paul Dinter, a former priest and associate director of Care for the Homeless in Manhattan. "Other people are pulling the levers of power. And by seeing himself as an executive until death, he has created a vacuum in which I'm sure there are all sorts of ungodly power plays and maneuvering going on."

Until recently, the topic of an incapacitated pope was all but taboo. It was only in May 2003, for instance, that a top Vatican official confirmed that John Paul suffers from Parkinson's disease -- many years after he showed signs of deterioration. So it is not surprising that there has been no public discussion about who would make medical decisions for him if he were unconscious. Or who would have the authority to disconnect a life support system, should it come to that.

Reese said that if such provisions exist, as most suspect, they should be made public.

As medicine's ability to prolong life increases, many believe a papal age limit is inevitable.

"This stuff has been on the table a very long time -- ever since Pope Paul VI mandated [in 1966] that bishops retire at 75," said Gerald O'Collins, a theologian at the Pontifical Gregorian University.

In the end, though, only a pope has the authority to make such a rule -- and that is unlikely in this pope's lifetime.

"Maybe it's not all about efficiency," said the Rev. Joseph Koterski, chairman of the Fordham University philosophy department. "I think what John Paul is doing right now in his hospital bed is witnessing to the inevitability of human suffering. ... And there's a tremendous nobility to that."