

Title: Papal term limits? Give it some thought

Author(s): Chester Gillis

Source: Commonweal 131.15 (Sept. 10, 2004): p12. From Literature Resource Center

Document Type: Article

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2004 Commonweal Foundation

Commonweal@msn.com

Full Text:

Most observers of John Paul II don't expect him to resign the papacy. Still, many have an opinion

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

