

William Petersen

If I were pope . . .

Although none of them got the call from Rome, U.S. CATHOLIC readers have some definite ideas about how the church should be run.

BEING THE SPIRITUAL LEADER of the world's 1.1 billion Catholics is not a job for the fainthearted. The demands are endless, the responsibilities are huge, the travel schedule is nonstop, and nearly every weekend and holiday is eaten up by work. But when we asked U.S. CATHOLIC readers what they would do if they were pope, some were downright brimming with enthusiasm and new ideas to bring to the position.

By HEATHER GRENNAN GARY, *associate editor of U.S. CATHOLIC.*

Thomasina Ciofalo Burns of Petersburg, New Jersey would like to use the role for radical peacemaking. "I'd invite all world leaders and religious leaders to the Vatican and lock the doors. When they agreed to cease all killing and to peace on Earth, then white smoke would be seen from the roof and only then would they be released!"

Helen Ciesla of Aberdeen, Maryland said she would completely restructure the Catholic Church, placing responsibility for determining anything that's not a doctrine of faith on the national bishops' conferences. "Yes, the church would look different in different coun-

tries," said Ciesla, "but cultures are different. Pretending that the whole world is culturally Caucasian and European has created enormous problems—and a total loss of credibility among most people."

One Mobile, Alabama reader said she would sell off the Vatican and all its treasures. "One doesn't need things to be Christlike. Museums can preserve art. The church needs to preserve bodies and souls."

Originally we heard from 238 subscribers in 2002 when we mailed a U.S. CATHOLIC Reader Survey on the papacy, Pope John Paul II, and the tasks that

would face the next pope when the time came. We posted the same survey on our website shortly after John Paul II's death in April, and another 51 people responded. The combined opinions and ideas of all 289 respondents covered a wide spectrum, but most agreed on two things: The papacy fulfills an important role in the church, and the job is a tough one.

Craig Gordon of Kingwood, Texas said the most important function of the papacy is to have someone serve as shepherd for the Catholic flock. Many survey respondents said the pope's main job is to promote unity within the church. "Too many voices speaking confuse people and shred unity," said a reader from New Kensington, Pennsylvania.

Rebecca Hamilton of Oklahoma City said the pope's primary role is "clarifying core Christian beliefs as found in the creeds."

Ann Danby from Quincy, Massachusetts said the pope's job is "to speak to non-Christians and be a symbol of love to the world."

But 10 percent of respondents didn't see the papacy as crucial to the church. "The papacy is similar to the monarchy in England," said Sara Moslener of LaVerne, California. "It exists only to remind us of the importance of tradition."

Alicia Masterson of St. Petersburg, Florida said the pope's role is not crucial because "most of what affects the average Catholic happens at the parish or diocesan level."

Another 7 percent weren't enthusiastic about the role of the papacy but saw its purpose. "Every enterprise needs a manager," said Jim Hamill of Midland, Michigan.

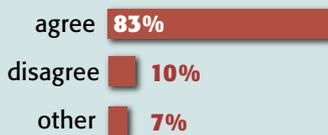
Appreciating John Paul II

According to our readers, as the last "manager of the enterprise" Pope John



AND THE SURVEY SAYS...

1. I think the papacy fulfills a crucial role in the church.



2. My opinion about Pope John Paul II is:

Readers surveyed in 2002:



Web visitors in April 2005:



Continued on page 26.

Paul II had many successes—as well as his share of disappointments. He also had plenty of charisma, a valuable trait for any leader. A few readers recalled their own encounters with John Paul II as a breath of fresh air. "His presence at World Youth Days spoke volumes to me," said Sister Mary Kay Moran, S.S.C.M. of Rockford, Illinois. "When I attended his liturgy in Washington D.C., he was vibrant and spoke to the youth of our church. We need a leader who does that."

"The greatest impression John Paul II made on me was when he donned sneakers, slacks, and a jacket and hiked with the youth in the U.S. many years ago," wrote Regina T. Thomann of Virginia Beach, Virginia.

The accomplishments U.S. CATHOLIC readers most frequently lauded John Paul for included his outspokenness against communism, his defense of life at all stages, his outreach to other religions and to youth, and his advocacy for peace. But other things he did also commanded notice and respect.

"Vatican II was like going to Disneyland for the first time," said Nancy Ullrey of Woodland, California. "As children we wanted to run forward, and he was the father who grabbed us by the collar and said, 'Slow down, we'll get there soon enough. I don't want you to get lost.'"

Judith Hansen of St. Joseph, Minnesota admired John Paul II because "he protected the church from radical liberals and ultraconservatives who tried to take it over."

A Carmichael, California reader cited his outspokenness against "the material excesses of capitalism," and Mark Yosick of Johnson City, Tennessee credited John Paul for using the media and travel as opportunities "to be an ambassador of Christ to the church and beyond."

Marian LeBlanc of Marion, Massachusetts said she appreciated how John Paul canonized so many new saints,

and a reader from Island Lake, Illinois was grateful for the development of the luminous mysteries of the rosary.

Nathan Nelson of Bridgeport, Ohio said one of John Paul's most important accomplishments was "showing us by his example the value of the disabled and the elderly, and the meaning of suffering and death."

"I will greatly miss Pope John Paul II," said Mimi Arima of Bellevue, Washington. "He had such a wonderful personalism that made me feel as if he were addressing me personally—whether I was reading his work or listening to him in person with a million other people! I really felt that he wanted to know me as much as I wanted to know him. And in knowing each other we were coming to a deeper knowledge of Christ himself."

Some disappointments

Perhaps not surprisingly, people who responded to the survey when it was posted on the U.S. CATHOLIC website shortly after John Paul's death had a more favorable opinion of him than did those who responded when we surveyed readers three years earlier.

Twenty-three percent of the 2002 respondents said they had a "strongly positive" opinion of John Paul II compared with 47 percent of the 2005 respondents. Twenty-four percent of the 2002 respondents reported a "somewhat negative" opinion compared to just 10 percent of 2005 respondents, and 10 percent of the 2002 respondents said they had a "strongly negative" opinion, but only 4 percent said they did in the online survey the week after his death.

The 2002 survey results included many comments from readers concerned about John Paul's ailing health and their hopes that he would step down out of consideration for the church. "Our pope has done a good job until recently when his health is obviously failing," a Meriden, Connecticut respondent said

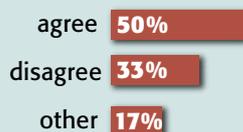
3. In my opinion, the pope and the Vatican have been too heavy-handed in disciplining and censuring theologians and others.



4. I think the pope should: (May check more than one.)

- 89% Influence peace, justice, and political issues throughout the world.
- 88% Be a respected moral leader.
- 88% Reach out toward people of other faiths.
- 22% Concentrate primarily on strengthening Catholic identity and orthodoxy.
- 15% Other.

5. I believe that several decades from now the pope's role will not be as powerful as it is now.



These results are based on survey responses from 289 U.S. CATHOLIC readers and website visitors.

in 2002. "I have my doubts as to whether he really is made aware of all the turmoil in our church, or whether he is being 'protected' by his staff. I think he should resign gracefully."

"Although I respect the pope and his position, I am concerned about his ability to make good decisions... his many health issues are a great distraction," Elsie Scruggs of Massena, New York wrote in 2002. "Unwell people are not able to make solid decisions all of the time."

One issue that was mentioned repeatedly in the answers from 2002—and much less frequently from April's website respondents—was John Paul II's slow reply to the clergy sex abuse crisis.

"I lost a lot of my respect for the pope in light of his lack of a meaningful response to the recent scandal about sexual abuse by some priests," said Marie Griffo of Rutherford, New Jersey. "He seems more concerned with protecting the mystique and power structure of the priesthood and the hierarchy than he is about the sinful cover-up on the part of the bishops and cardinals involved. The pope has spent a lot of time and effort on emphasizing the sinfulness of birth control and the evil of abortion, but he can't seem to declare abuse of the vulnerable and conspiracy to cover-up as equally, if not more, sinful."

Other respondents had criticisms of the previous pope, too. "While I held John Paul in the highest regard in matters of peace and justice, I was really steamed most of the time at his leadership style and the type of people he put in positions of great authority," said Mike Slajchert of Chicago.

Ralph Parchment of Grosse Pointe, Michigan noted a particular paradox of John Paul II's leadership: "Although he expressed generosity and goodwill toward non-Catholics around the world, he was not willing to have a dialogue within the church with honestly faithful people about controversial issues."

AND THE WINNER IS . . .

Many readers wagered a guess about who might fill the vacancy left by John Paul II. We had four who got it right: Jack Poeman of Warren, Michigan; Mary P. Sanady of West Hartford, Connecticut; the Rev. J. Thomas Shelley of Loganville, Pennsylvania; and Milka Stanojevich of Chicago all guessed Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger would be elected pope.



Plenty of names were bandied about, and even back in 2002 some of our readers picked cardinals who were favorites in the recent pre-conclave hoopla. Francis Arinze of Nigeria, Godfried Danneels of Belgium, Oscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga of Honduras, Walter Kasper of Germany, and Giovanni Battista Re and Dionigi Tettamanzi of Italy were each mentioned several times. We also received three responses from people who said they hoped the cardinals would *not* choose Ratzinger for the job.

David Herrmann of Oliver Springs, Tennessee played it safe with his bet: "An Italian, intended to be an interim until the church considers a longer-term answer." Almost 20 percent of those who guessed thought someone from a developing country would be made pope.

Juanita Hendry of Catonsville, Maryland didn't have a guess, but did have a request: "A new conclave—including women, both religious and lay, and lay men—should be called to choose a new pope."

Both Rene Buchanan of Boston and Brother Harold W. Eccles, C.F.X. of Hinche, Haiti picked a long, long, long shot for the post: Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister. Explained Eccles: "If there is not a radical change in the form and style of leadership, leadership will become irrelevant and small Christian communities will keep the faith alive."

"Considering the makeup of the current College of Cardinals it's hard to expect much," said Sister Kathleen Koerner, S.C. of Jersey City, New Jersey. "However, the Holy Spirit is still alive and well. After all, wasn't the wonderful John XXIII a complete surprise?"

We asked readers if they thought the pope and the curia had been too heavy-handed in disciplining and censoring theologians. Seventy-one percent thought they had.

"John Paul II refused to tolerate dissent," said Eric Fredericks of Chicago. "His silencing of theologians smacked of authoritarianism. This is hardly what Jesus had in mind when he demonstrated authority to Peter in the washing of feet. John Paul did a lot of good, but at the same time he hardly could be said to have consistently fed Jesus' lambs."

But 19 percent didn't think theologians were unjustly targeted, and 10 percent weren't sure. "I don't have a good knowledge of this subject, but I do think the pope has an obligation to state the church's view on issues," said Nancy Carney of Sacramento, California in a response echoed by many. "This does not mean that there won't be differing views and that they shouldn't be discussed."

What's on the agenda?

We asked readers what they thought were the top agenda items for the new pope, and they had plenty of answers.

"Ensure that Catholics around the world are not deprived of Mass," said Tom Paulus of East Granby, Connecticut. And readers overwhelmingly listed the consideration of new candidates for the priesthood—including women and married men—as their No. 1 item.

The other most frequently cited issues included the role of the laity, collegiality among church leaders, the role of women, birth control, social justice issues—especially poverty and peace—and the church's relationship with other faith communities, particularly Protestant and Orthodox Christians and Islam.

Implementing Vatican II reforms, promoting the culture of life, and revisiting the celibacy requirement for

priests were often mentioned as well.

One Washington, West Virginia respondent listed "church survival" as a top priority, and in their own ways so did several others.

Theresa M. Best of Spring Hill, Florida said, "Continue to respond to modernity—bring back intellectuals to respond to issues positively." And Christine Purcell of Coolville, Ohio wrote, "Continue to stand strong on moral issues, especially for our youth, but rid ourselves of the shame and guilt heaped on the People of God."

With all the issues they wanted addressed, what did our readers think would actually happen in the new pontificate?

Some were hopeful. "I believe that

women will be welcomed as permanent deacons and that laity will have a greater role in selecting bishops and will be given more authority to 'partner' with the hierarchy," wrote a Wilmington, Delaware reader.

"It is my hope that he will at least allow priests to marry," said Carole M. Cox of Newington, Connecticut, who suggested the new pope begin by inviting back to ministry those who have left the priesthood to marry.

"John Paul II will be a tough act to follow," wrote Father Richard Siefer of DuBois, Pennsylvania. "But the time is ripe for positive and clear change on celibacy, sexuality, and women's issues (ordination)."

Terrance J. Cynar of Reno, Nevada

took a longer view. "It will be the pope after the next pope who will change the church."

Others were even more pessimistic: "I fear movement toward a pre-Vatican II approach to decision making," said a Mahomet, Illinois reader.

Fred Riler of Vancouver, Washington said the change he expects to see is "unfortunately very little, if any. The conservative bent of the College of Cardinals will elect another very conservative pope."

Pope for a day

Although the current papal criteria make the vast majority of U.S. CATHOLIC readers ineligible for the job, it doesn't mean they can't dream.

Certainly not everyone would be thrilled with being named the successor of Peter. Thomas L. Gasper of Martinsburg, West Virginia said if he

were named pope, he'd "probably die after one month in office, like Pope John Paul I." More than a dozen others said they would resign or not be offered the job in the first place. And one Canadian reader said he would "have to buy my wife a whole new wardrobe. She would not appreciate me having better dresses than she does."

But others shared thoughtful reflections on the fantasy. Cecilia Naber of Kenosha, Wisconsin said she would "give the local churches more autonomy, for example, giving the laity a voice in choosing their bishops."

Robert Marko of Grand Rapids, Michigan said he'd continue to seek full communion with Orthodox churches.

A Medford, Massachusetts reader said she would "forgive divorced Catholics through Confession and allow them to receive Communion. . . . It makes absolutely no sense to me that a felon can be forgiven through Confession and

receive Holy Communion but a divorced person cannot."

Milka Stanojevich of Chicago said if she were pope she'd "serve the church as if God were watching me and judging my every move and act accordingly. I would bring warmth into the church, and joy, not just at Christmas and Easter but each day."

Pat Gartenberg of Livingston, New Jersey said very simply that she would "pray without ceasing to the Lord for guidance."

We will hope and pray that Pope Benedict XVI does just that. **USC**

Join the conversation—online. In addition to a sample of subscribers, all are invited to respond to U.S. CATHOLIC's monthly **Sounding Board** survey at www.uscatholic.org. This month, join U.S. CATHOLIC readers as they discuss why Catholics should support public schools.



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