

Earlier this month *Newsweek* ran an article calling for the resignation of Pope John Paul II. The magazine said he has had a great career, he has worked hard, he is tired, the Church needs a strong leader to face today's challenges – he should retire happy and let a new pope in. Last week, just before the holy father visited Poland, the *New York Times* predicted he would announce his retirement there. Well, the trip has come and gone, and John Paul is still showing up for work in the morning.

It is possible for a pope to resign. Church law says he must make the resignation freely and publicly, and no one has to accept it. That's all it says. If John Paul wished to resign, he would simply have to announce it on his own free will. Nobody has to say yes or no. He can just do it.

It has happened four times before. In the year 235 Pope Pontian was arrested by an anti-Christian emperor and deported to Sardinia to end his life laboring in mines. He resigned to let someone else to serve as pope while he was in exile. He appears on our calendar as a saint every August 13th.

In 537 the Empress Theodora simply wanted someone else to be pope, someone more favorable to her way of looking at things. She forced Pope Severius to resign.

Pope Celestine V was elected in 1294, but quickly realized he was not suited for the job. He called the electors back together, removed his papal insignia, announced his retirement and had them elect a new pope on the spot. Boniface VIII took his place and Celestine went off to the country to enjoy the quiet life of a monk.

At the start of the 15th century, three people claimed to be pope. The authentic one was Gregory XII. Everyone wanted this scandal to end, so he resigned in 1415 in order to have a clean election. Martin V succeeded him.

Popes have resigned, and John Paul could if he wanted to. But he believes the end of his office will come when God takes him home. He has served almost 24 years. If Peter is pope #1, John Paul is pope #262. Only four others have served longer than he has, and he will overtake one of them in a few weeks.

In the gospel Jesus blesses Peter for his strong faith and calls him "Rock". After the resurrection, Peter led the church in Antioch and then in Rome, where he died a martyr. Jesus founded the church on Peter's faith. Faith in Christ started our church and faith in Christ sustains it. When times are troubled, we look to people like John Paul II for inspiration, a rock of faith upon which our community can stand.