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Pope Francis greets the faithful as he leaves St. Mary Major Basilica after participating in a rosary prayer for peace, in Rome, May 31. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)



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Despite saying repeatedly that he has no plans to retire, Pope Francis recently made clear that if he is ever too sick to perform his duties, he would resign his position, while doing it differently from his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI.

But what happens if Francis, or any pope, falls into a coma and cannot resign? What happens if he becomes mentally incapacitated?

These are nightmare scenarios for the Catholic Church because the Vatican does not have anything like the 25th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which provides a process for replacing a president who is unable to discharge his duties.

In olden days, people in comas did not live very long. They would soon die of dehydration or hunger. Today, people in comas can survive for months and years. If the pope were in a coma for months or years, what would happen?

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Likewise, in the old days, if a pope went insane, the cardinals would lock him up in a back room and run the church until he died. They could not get away with that today in an age of mass media.

But in these fractious days in which conservatives and fans of Francis contest each other's position, any action by the College of Cardinals or the Vatican Curia to deal with emergencies might be considered illegitimate by others and lead to a schism in the church.

Most Catholics, of course, would not be affected. The ordinary life of the church, which is very decentralized, would continue with an impeded pope. Masses would be said, the sacraments would be celebrated, bishops would continue running their dioceses.

But unlike hundreds of years ago, the pope is now so central to the governance of the church that it is hard to imagine it operating without a pope.

A few hundreds of years ago, bishops were selected on the local level. Today, when a bishop dies, an administrator with limited authority is chosen by the diocesan consultors until the pope personally selects a new bishop. Without a pope, new bishops could not be appointed.

The pope also plays an essential role as head of the college of bishops. Without him, we might see the college quickly falling into disputes over doctrine and practice. A pope is also needed to direct the Vatican Curia.

There are rumors that recent popes have written secret documents giving instructions on what to do if they fall into a coma, but the authenticity of any such document could be questioned if it was not made public until after the pope was impaired. In addition, the procedures might not be binding if they were not officially promulgated. Better to have a public law laying out the proper procedure so everyone knows how to proceed.

What might such a procedure look like?

First, it should not be an easy or quick procedure. We would not want a quick procedure when the pope might come out of a coma and find out he has been replaced.

Second, it should be a public, transparent procedure leading to consensus that the right thing has been done for the good of the church. We do not want a procedure that could be accused of being a coup d'état.

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The process might go something like this: To start the process, a petition signed by one-third of the cardinal electors would be needed to call for a meeting of the cardinals to determine the ability of the pope to govern. They could require medical professionals to examine the pope and report to them on the state of his health.

It would then require a vote of two-thirds of the cardinal electors to declare the pope incapable of doing his duties. This declaration would then have to be ratified by a two-thirds vote of all the diocesan bishops in the world. These votes of the cardinals and bishops should be publicly recorded.

This procedure would take time and be purposefully difficult to set a high bar for removing a pope. It would demand broad consensus within the church that the pope is no longer capable of doing his job. With any luck, the pope would die before the procedure is completed.

Making the procedure difficult and time consuming would limit the temptation of using the procedure to remove a pope with whom some people disagree.

Once two-thirds of the bishops agree that the pope can no longer function, the cardinals could meet in conclave and elect a new pope, following normal procedures.

If a pope becomes impeded and no procedure is in place, canon lawyers would debate what to do. The Diocese of Rome, the secretary of state, the Roman Curia and the College of Cardinals might each come up with different ways of proceeding. Disagreements would lead to divisions in the church. Without agreement, there might be schism.

What I describe is a nightmare scenario, but one that is possible. It is avoidable if the pope promulgates procedures for dealing with an incapacitated pope.