

THE TIMES ONLINE

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/printFriendly/0,,1-3-608774,00.html>

March 13, 2003

Papaya gives the Pope some extra zest

From Richard Owen in Rome

VATICAN sources have attributed a recent recovery in the Pope's health in part to an "alternative medicine" cure made from papaya extract.

The Pope, who will be 83 in May, has been transformed from a hunched figure, able to speak only with difficulty, to a more upright, relaxed and coherent man who "looks at least five years younger", Vatican insiders say. The change is the talk of Rome.

The Pope suffers from Parkinson's disease, which has increasingly forced him to move around on a mobile platform and hand his speeches to others to read. His left hand trembled uncontrollably and his speech was badly slurred.

But he has started to show what some describe as a "miraculous recovery". The improvement was noticeable when he spoke to the Italian parliament for nearly an hour last November, but has accelerated in recent weeks to the point where aides and those who meet him in private audiences have been astonished by his new-found vigour. "He is a different man," one said.

The Pope is speaking clearly and coherently, his breathing is much less laboured, he often walks unaided and his posture has straightened. His gestures are decisive and the tremor in his left hand has all but disappeared.

Vatican sources said that the Pope had been given a French-produced "alternative medicine" health supplement based on extract of papaya, an anti-oxidant rich in vitamins.

The supplement is said to have been supplied by Luc Montagnier, a French virologist, who was received by the Pope last June along with an American doctor. They urged him to reconsider his opposition to condoms as a means of combating Aids.

Dr Montagnier said that he had begun research into the curative properties of papaya after noticing that people who habitually ate it in the Philippines tended to "live long and healthy lives". He said it was "not a cure but a palliative — it reduces the side effects and symptoms of Parkinson's".

Some people attribute the Pope's recovery to his "phenomenal willpower" and his determined campaign to stop war with Iraq. Vatican officials fear, however, that the recovery may be temporary if the Pope is taxed by further travels and suffers a relapse.

Against the advice of his doctors, the Pope is insisting on trips to Spain, Croatia, Bosnia and Slovakia over the next few months. He may also visit Mongolia in the summer and there are reports that his anti-war drive will take him to the European Parliament in Strasbourg and the United Nations in New York.

* The Pope is expected to beatify a Bosnian Croat during his visit to the country in June, officials said yesterday. Preliminary plans are for the Pope to visit the town of Banja Luka, the stronghold of the Orthodox Serbs, to beatify Ivan Merz, a philosopher and evangelist who died in 1928.