

Vatican official talks about papal retirement: The ailing pontiff

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In a startling break with Vatican protocol, a high Vatican official has addressed the issue of whether the ailing Pope John Paul II should retire.

Even before the frail pontiff ended his nine-day hospital stay while fighting respiratory problems, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the secretary of state who ranks No. 2 behind the pope in the Vatican hierarchy, implied that retirement was a possibility.

Asked by reporters February 7 if the 84-year-old John Paul, whose flu and breathing difficulties were compounded by Parkinson's disease, had considered stepping down as leader of the world's more than 1 billion Catholics, Sodano said: "We leave this to the conscience of the pope. If there is a man of the church who is guided by the Holy Spirit, if there is a man who loves the church more than everything, if there is a man who has marvelous wisdom, it is the pope. We must have enormous faith in him. He knows what he must do."

Vatican officials rarely if ever discuss the possibility of a reigning pope's retirement or death or speculate about his eventual successor.

It was all the more surprising that Sodano would entertain the idea of retirement because he is in charge of day-to-day operations of the Vatican in the pope's absence and is thus its voice. He spoke to reporters at the opening of the new headquarters of the Vatican Publishing House, Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

Sodano went on, however, to say that he hoped that John Paul would not only recover but would live to surpass the 32-year-long papacy of Pius IX, making him history's longest serving pope after St. Peter, for whom no exact records exist.

But the cardinal's implicit acknowledgment that retirement was a possibility indicated the extent of Vatican concern over the pope's worsening health.

Italian Cardinal Mario Francesco Pompedda, who heads the Vatican's supreme court, said in an interview last month for the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* that John Paul can remain in office even if he loses the ability to speak.

The prelate said, "It is necessary to make a distinction between sacrament and the exercise of the power of government." Pompedda said that to administer the sacraments, the priest must have a voice, but the exercise of the power of ministry "is an exercise of jurisdiction." He added: "This can be done in writing or with a gesture or an expression."

Church law provides for the resignation of the pope as long as he resigns voluntarily, and at least four popes have abdicated, although not always voluntarily. The last was Gregory XII in 1415.

In the past, John Paul has made it clear that he did not intend to resign. "There is no place for a pope emeritus," he said in 1994. On a visit to his native Poland in 2002 he prayed at the Sanctuary of Kalwaria for "the force of body and spirit to be able to carry out until the end the mission assigned to me by the Risen."

German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the powerful prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said in 2002 that if only physical suffering is involved, the pope will remain at his post. But, Ratzinger added with unusual candor, "if he were to see that he absolutely could not do it anymore, then definitely he would resign." -*Religion News Service*