Vatican
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An older white man wears a red chasuble with a gold piece down the middle with a red cross

Cardinal Gerhard Müller attends the funeral Mass for Australian Cardinal George Pell in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in this file photo from Jan. 14. At a book presentation June 9, Müller said popes should retire "only in extreme cases." (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



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A papal resignation should occur only in "truly extreme cases" and must not "become the norm," said the former head of the Vatican's doctrinal office.

Speaking at the presentation of his book "In Bona Fede" (In Good Faith), co-written with Italian journalist Franca Giansoldati, Cardinal Gerhard Müller said June 9 that Pope Benedict XVI's decision to retire from the papacy should remain an exception.

"We know that until the last hour of (Benedict's) life he was totally competent intellectually and spiritually, and this is enough, he didn't have to go on trips," said the cardinal. "He would have been capable of governing the church until his death."

Müller was the prefect of the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 2012 to 2017. His comments came just two days after Pope Francis was put under general anesthesia to undergo a three-hour abdominal surgery for a hernia June 7. The Vatican said June 12 the pope's recovery remains normal and that he is working from the hospital.

Although Francis has alluded to the possibility of resigning from the papacy if he was not capable of fulfilling his duties, in February he told a group of Jesuits working in Congo that the ministry of the pope should be "ad vitam" -- for life.

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In December 2022, the pope revealed to the Spanish newspaper ABC that he had signed a resignation letter "in case of a health impediment" and had given it to Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, then Vatican secretary of state, two months after he was elected to the papacy.

Müller said that precisely because the instances in which a pope should resign are extreme, the church "cannot form rules in advance" to govern them. He noted, however, that popes maintain the right to resign if they choose to.

"The papacy, the episcopate, is a testimony of faith also in its passion," said the cardinal. "It should not be compared to the office of a minister or president; there's a big difference. In this case, we have different, more spiritual, categories to consider."

Müller said that despite increasing life expectancy worldwide, the church should not institute an age limit on the papacy.

"We have so many bishops that are 60 years old that are not very competent and others that are 85 years old that are more competent," he said.