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Pope Francis meets Archbishop Georg Gänswein, personal secretary to the late Pope Benedic

Pope Francis meets Archbishop Georg Gänswein, personal secretary to the late Pope Benedict XVI, in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican May 19, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis has relieved Archbishop Georg Gänswein, the longtime personal secretary to Pope Benedict XVI, of his duties as prefect of the papal household and sent him home to Germany without an assignment, the Vatican announced on June 15.

While it is customary for personal secretaries of the popes to leave the Vatican following the death of the individual they served, it is unusual for them to exit without a new role.

But Gänswein occupied a unique position for nearly 10 years, serving both a retired pope and the current pope, which he himself described in 2013 as a "challenge."

In 2020, following a disastrous episode regarding the publication of a book on clerical celibacy, in which Benedict was originally listed as a co-author — a decision that Gänswein initially defended before asking to have the retired pontiff's name removed — Francis asked him to devote himself to the full-time care of Benedict.

At the time, the Vatican described it as a "redistribution" of his duties, but the German archbishop would later write that he viewed it as a demotion.

In a memoir published days after Benedict's death in January 2023, the longtime aide to the German pope admitted that he did not enjoy the same closeness to Francis as he did his longtime boss, Pope Benedict, writing that he and Francis never established "a climate of trust."

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Much to the surprise of Vatican officials, the publication of the book, "Nothing But the Truth: My Life Beside Benedict XVI," was announced just days after his former boss' death and even before his funeral.

The book documented what Gänswein portrayed as stark differences between Benedict and Francis and was widely viewed inside the Vatican as a breach of trust and confidentiality. One month later, in February, Francis said he believed the recent death of Benedict had been "instrumentalized" by those using the late pope’s death to serve their own agendas.

Another much discussed 2022 book, "The Monastery," painted a portrait of Gänswein as a critical point of reference for conservative allies of Benedict XVI disgruntled with the direction of the Francis papacy.

News of Gänswein's imminent return to Germany first surfaced in the daily German newspaper Die Welt earlier this month. The report said that the archbishop would not be given a new assignment or formal role in his home Archdiocese of Freiburg.

Gänswein, now 66, first moved to Rome in 1993, where he would go on to serve the late pope for a quarter of a century. He first worked as an official under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratizinger at the Vatican's doctrinal office, and when Ratzinger was elected pope in 2005, Gänswein was named as his personal secretary.

A brief statement in the Vatican's daily bulletin said that "the Holy Father has arranged for Archbishop Gänswein to return, for the time being, to his home diocese as of July 1."