Reports say Cardinal Martini may be near death

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UPDATE: Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini has died. Read the full story here.

Italian media reports suggest that Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, a longtime hero of the church’s liberal wing often regarded as a pope in waiting, may be nearing death as a result of complications related to Parkinson’s disease.

A Jesuit, the 85-year-old Martini served as the Archbishop of Milan from 1980 to 2002.

Multiple press reports cite Italian neurologist Gianni Pezzoli, who has been treating Martini since his diagnosis with Parkinson's more than a decade ago, as saying the cardinal has entered a ‘terminal phase’ of his illness.

According to Pezzoli, Martini suffered acute digestive failure in mid-August and is unable to absorb food or water naturally. Martini is still lucid, Pezzoli said, and is receiving liquids through an IV but has refused use of a feeding tube.

According to Pezzoli, Martini’s condition could last ‘days or years.’

Press reports indicate that Pope Benedict XVI was informed of Martini’s condition Thursday evening and is following the situation ‘closely.’

A well-regarded expert on scripture, Martini has published more than 40 books and is said to have at least a working knowledge of 11 languages.
Although Martini was a John Paul II appointee, he came to be regarded during the 1980s and 1990s as the informal leader of the "loyal opposition" to the more conservative drift of the church under John Paul. Martini was widely tipped as a papal candidate, and often enjoyed a media profile second only to that of the pope himself.

Over the years, Martini has defended the use of contraception in some instances, called for greater roles for women in the church (including the ordination of female deacons), signaled openness to same-sex relationships, questioned mandatory celibacy for priests, attacked growing centralization in Rome, and advocated greater collegiality among the world's bishops.

Notably in light of his own reported choice to decline a feeding tube, Martini has also defended the right of patients to refuse treatments amid "right to die" controversies in Italy, against some Catholic commentators who see withdrawing artificial means of support as tantamount to euthanasia.

Martini has long been a cultural point of reference well outside the Catholic church, carrying on a famous exchange of correspondence, for instance, with Italian novelist and intellectual Umberto Eco.

Martini has been widely praised for his erudition and his leadership, including winning the coveted French "European of the Year" prize in 2000. For his outreach to Judaism, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 2006.

Yet given Martini's liberal profile, he's drawn criticism as well as praise. Recently, for instance, correspondence revealed as part of the Vatileaks affair showed that Spanish Fr. Julian Carrón, head of the Communion and Liberation movement, wrote to Benedict XVI in March 2011 complaining that under Martini, "a sort of "alternative magisterium" to Rome and the Holy Father" took shape in Milan.

Carrón also blasted the political orientation of the church in Milan under Martini and his successor, Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi, protesting "a certain unilateralism of interventions on social justice, at the expense of other fundamental themes of social doctrine," as well as a "systematic" bias in favor of the political center-left.

At the peak of his influence, Martini was seen as the leader of a reform-minded bloc of cardinals in important European dioceses, which included Cardinals Franz König in Vienna, Basil Hume in Westminster, and Godfried Danneels in Brussels. All are now retired, with König and Hume both deceased.

In a statement released today by the Milan archdiocese, Cardinal Angelo Scola asked "all the faithful of the diocese, and all those who hold [Martini] dear" to offer "special prayers, expressions of affection and closeness in this delicate moment."

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