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Pope Benedict XVI promotes personal secretary to head of household

by Alessandro Speciale by Religion News Service

Vatican City — Pope Benedict XVI on Friday promoted his personal secretary to head of the papal household, giving Msgr. Georg Gaenswein even larger influence in organizing the aging pontiff's schedule and meetings.

Gaenswein has been Benedict's closest aide since his election in 2005, and also served as secretary when then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger headed the Vatican's doctrinal office.

The German-born Gaenswein was appointed prefect of the papal household, replacing American Archbishop James Harvey, who was recently made a cardinal.

Already an influential figure in the Vatican for his constant contact with the pope, Gaenswein, 56, will now have the final word in deciding who meets the pope and in arranging his public audiences. He will also be made an archbishop.

As the 85-year-old Benedict starts looking frailer, Gaenswein's role is bound to become increasingly significant.

His promotion mirrors that of Pope John Paul II's all-powerful personal secretary, Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, who was made assistant prefect of the papal household in the last years of John Paul's papacy.

Gaenswein's appointment comes on the heels of the Vatileaks scandal, which shook the closely knit papal household when Benedict's personal assistant, Paolo Gabriele, stole the pontiff's private papers and leaked them to the press.

Gabriele, who is now serving an 18-month jail term in a Vatican cell, said during his trial that he had photocopied confidential documents in the office Gaenswein shares with the pope's second secretary, a Maltese priest.

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