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Retired pope's eyes 'are bright and joyous,' says longtime friend

by Sarah MacDonald by Catholic News Service

Maynooth, Ireland — One of retired Pope Benedict XVI's oldest confidants downplayed concerns about the pontiff's health, saying his friend was mentally and physically "fresh."

Salvatorian Fr. Stephan Otto Horn, president of the "Ratzinger Schulerkreis" (Ratzinger Student Circle), told Catholic News Service he met the retired pope in Rome in early June, and he acknowledged his mentor was frail.

"He is 86 now. At that age you are not so strong, but he seemed to me to be very fresh. His memory is fresh and his eyes are very bright and joyous," he said.

Horn was an academic assistant to then-Fr. Joseph Ratzinger from 1971 to 1977 at Germany's University of Regensburg. In early June, the priest met the former pope for an hour to discuss this year's Ratzinger Schulerkreis, scheduled to meet Aug. 29-Sept. 2 in Castel Gandolfo, Italy.

The circle of the retired pope's students has met since 1978 to discuss topics in theology and the life of the church.

Although Pope Benedict confirmed to Horn that he will not attend the meeting of his former students and the young theologians of the Junior Ratzinger Schulerkreis, the retired pope chose the speaker, French historian Remi Brague, and the topic to be discussed, "The Question of God Against the Background of Secularization."

"When I was with him, I asked him if it would be possible for him to attend, perhaps even for part of it. But he said he will stay at his convent and will not go to Castel Gandolfo," Horn said.

Horn also told CNS that Pope Benedict said Pope Francis had been trying to convince him to go to Castel Gandolfo for a vacation, while he was trying to convince Pope Francis to take a vacation there.

"He told me he had told Pope Francis that if (Francis) couldn't go there for a long time, then he should at least go there for Aug. 15, the feast of the Assumption, which the pope traditionally spends with the people of Castel Gandolfo," Horn said.

Speaking to CNS at the Divine Word Missionaries school in Maynooth, during a symposium on the theology of Joseph Ratzinger, Father Horn said: "After the (Feb. 11) resignation it was difficult for him for three weeks, but after those three weeks, his well-being began improving. And he is very interested in everything," said the priest, who is in regular communication with his former mentor.

Of his decision to resign, Horn said Pope Benedict was "convinced his decision was the right one," and was happy and serene with it.

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"The Dynamism of Ratzinger's Theology" conference was organized by a retired professor of moral theology at Maynooth, Divine Word Fr. Vincent Twomey, a former doctoral student of Pope Benedict and another member of the "Ratzinger Schulerkreis." The theological conference drew speakers from Ireland, Germany and Poland.

Asked about the absence of his mentor from this year's Schulerkreis, Twomey, who will turn 72 in July, told CNS: "We are all getting old. Every year one or two people die -- so it can't continue. We'll go this year primarily out of homage to Benedict."

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