

# **African Cardinal Gantin, former Vatican official, dies in Paris**

VATICAN CITY – Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, a pioneering church figure for Africa and an influential voice at the Vatican for more than 30 years, died in Paris May 13 at the age of 86.

Pope Benedict XVI, in a telegram of condolences, praised the cardinal for his pastoral ministry and for his generous service in Rome, where he worked for several Vatican offices.

“This eminent son of Benin and of Africa was respected by all, animated by a deeply apostolic spirit and a superior sense of the church and its mission in the world,” the pope said.

The cardinal’s death leaves the College of Cardinals with 194 members. Of that number, 118 are under age 80 and therefore eligible to vote in a conclave.

Cardinal Gantin’s body was being flown from Paris for burial in Benin, a poor West African country where the cardinal was born and had lived in recent years.

Cardinal Gantin became the first black African archbishop in 1960. Sixteen years later, he became the first African to head a major Vatican department when he was made president of the Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission.

He was named a cardinal in 1977, and some observers gave him an outside chance in the two conclaves to elect a new pope in 1978. Another landmark came in 1984, when he was made head of the Vatican’s Congregation for Bishops, which coordinates the selection of new bishops around the world.

In 1993, he became the first black African to be chosen as dean of the College of Cardinals. He stepped down from that post in 2002 and was replaced by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger – a move that gave Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict, a leading role in the period leading up to the conclave that elected him in 2005.

While often seen as a Third World church leader who broke new ground in Rome, Cardinal Gantin was also a strong defender of the Roman Curia. At a 1991 synod, he criticized “certain ideas and anti-Roman attitudes, disseminated in the West through the teachings of theologians and masters of thought.”

In 2003, as one of six Vatican officials chosen to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul II’s pontificate, he dismissed the idea that the Curia was sometimes not in perfect agreement with the pope and his directives.

“‘The pope, yes; the Curia, no.’ What a strange way to conceive of our church, divided at the highest level in two parts ... one part open and helpful, the other careerist and never satisfied,” he said.

As head of the bishops congregation, Cardinal Gantin was involved in his share of problematic issues.

In 1988, Cardinal Gantin oversaw a draft document on the limits of the authority of bishops’ conferences, which drew sharp criticism from several leading U.S. theologians and church law experts. Ten more years of study were needed before the pope issued an apostolic letter on the topic.

In the 1980s, Cardinal Gantin and Cardinal Ratzinger were key figures in the investigation and temporary removal of the pastoral authority of Seattle Archbishop Raymond G. Hunthausen, who had clashed with the Vatican on several policies.

In 1989, Cardinal Gantin moderated an extraordinary meeting between U.S. bishops and Vatican officials to discuss tensions and problems.

Over the years, he met with a number of Latin American bishops to work out pastoral differences over such things as liberation theology. In 1995, he informed French Bishop Jacques Gaillot that he was being removed from the Diocese of Evreux after refusing to modify his positions on married priests, AIDS and homosexuality.

Even after he retired in 1998 as head of the Congregation for Bishops, Cardinal Gantin continued to have an influential voice in Rome.

In 1999, he prompted much discussion when he suggested that bishops, once appointed to a diocese, should stay there the rest of their lives, instead of being transferred to larger sees. He said that would discourage careerism in the episcopate.

Born May 8, 1922, in what was then French West Africa, the future cardinal was ordained a priest in 1951. He studied canon law at Rome's Pontifical Urbanian University and in 1957 was made an auxiliary bishop of Cotonou, in what is now Benin. He became archbishop of Cotonou in 1960, the same year his country, then known as Dahomey, achieved independence.

In 1971 he was called to Rome to be an assistant secretary at the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples; two years later, he was appointed secretary. In 1975 he was named vice president of the Vatican's justice and peace commission, and later became president; he was also president of the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, which coordinates charity efforts.

When, at age 80, he retired as dean of the College of Cardinals, a post that can be held until death, he had to convince Pope John Paul to accept his decision. In an interview at that time, he said he was leaving Rome to return to Benin and end his life "in prayer and simplicity."