

Informal atmosphere marks stays at papal villa, says longtime staffer

VATICAN CITY – Pope John XXIII used to duck out incognito and visit surrounding towns. Pope John Paul II played hide-and-seek with employees' children. And Pope Benedict XVI fills the evening air with notes from his piano.

It's all part of the informal family atmosphere that reigns at the papal villa at Castel Gandolfo outside Rome, said Saverio Petrillo, director of the villa since 1986 and a staff member there for the last 50 years.

Each pope has had a different style, Petrillo told the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, in an interview published Aug. 26.

Pope John Paul was the first to really use the villa as a second home. Especially in the early years, he hosted evening meetings with young people where the youths would light bonfires, sing songs and tell stories about their lives.

Pope John Paul would pay frequent visits to the families of the 50 or so employees who live and work on the villa grounds, accepting a cup of tea and chatting casually with them, Petrillo said.

The employees' children, whenever they would see the pope walking in the gardens, would hide behind the bushes and jump out at him when he passed. The pope loved the game and played along, Petrillo said.

It was Pope John Paul who had a swimming pool built at the villa so that he could exercise, on the advice of doctors, the director said. When some critics objected to the expense, the Polish pope joked: "A new conclave would cost a lot more."

Petrillo said Pope Benedict impresses the villa staff with his extraordinary sensitivity and spirituality. The German pope finds the quiet villa a perfect place to write, and every evening the staff hears the pope at his piano, playing his favorite works of Mozart, Bach and Beethoven.

"It makes us happy because it means he really feels at home here," Petrillo said.

The 50-acre villa, built on the grounds of a Roman emperor's country residence, is perched in the Alban Hills south of Rome. Petrillo began working there in 1958, in the waning days of Pope Pius XII.

He learned that during World War II, Pope Pius had not only opened the doors of the villa to thousands of people fleeing the Nazi army, but on many occasions gave up his bedroom to expectant women among the refugees.

"Fifty babies were born in that room," Petrillo said.

Pope John liked the villa in part because he could slip out so easily.

"Every now and then he disappeared. He would go out one of the gates without telling anyone and without an escort," Petrillo said. The pontiff would make his way to nearby towns and just hang out with people.

One Sunday morning the staff received phone calls placing the pope at the sea town of Anzio, then at Nettuno and then at the lake below Castel Gandolfo. As his aides panicked, the pope returned calmly in time to lead the Angelus prayer at noon.

Pope Paul VI came to pray at the villa as a cardinal for a week before the 1963 conclave that elected him pope. When it came time for the cardinal to leave the residence for Rome, the villa's doorman said goodbye with the words, "Best wishes, Holy Father!"

By using the words reserved for addressing a pope, the doorman had, of course, violated the age-old rule of never wishing a cardinal good luck as he went into a conclave. The doorman received a burning glare from the villa's director.

When Pope Paul visited the villa, it was always for spiritual sustenance, Petrillo said.

"He prayed and that's all," he said.

Like Pope Pius, Pope Paul died at Castel Gandolfo, and his body remained there three days for public viewing before a simple funeral procession carried him back to Rome.

When Pope Pius died in 1958, Petrillo said he was surprised and saddened to see how the reduced number of papal aides at the villa made for a lonely death.

“Before I began working there, I thought the pope would always be surrounded by a big crowd of people, ready to respond to his every desire. But when I saw Pius XII dying, I realized how alone he was. No one was there,” he said.