

Pope accepts resignation of controversial bishop

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina – Pope Benedict XVI has accepted the resignation of the controversial head of Argentina's military diocese, who submitted his resignation at age 75 in accordance with canon law.

There was no immediate word on who would succeed Bishop Antonio Baseotto, who clashed with the government of President Nestor Kirchner two years ago.

Pope Benedict accepted his resignation May 15. Earlier this year, an Argentine legislator drafted a bill to eliminate his position.

Kirchner clashed with Bishop Baseotto in early 2005 after the bishop wrote a letter to Health Minister Gines Gonzalez Garcia containing a quotation from Mark 9:42: "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe (in me) to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea."

The health minister has supported broadening Argentina's abortion law.

Kirchner expressed offense at what he claimed was an allusion to the notorious death flights during Argentina's military dictatorship in the 1970s, when government opponents were dumped from airplanes into the sea.

Kirchner had asked that Bishop Baseotto be replaced, but the Vatican refused. The president downgraded the bishop's military rank and salary.

Carlos Gonzalez, secretary-general of Argentina's military diocese, told Catholic News Service that only the pope could designate a replacement but that the president approves the choice under a 1957 Vatican-Argentine accord that formally created a military diocese.

"In this specific case, because we are dealing with a force of the state (the military), the president's approval is needed," Gonzalez said.

A spokeswoman at Argentina's Foreign Ministry, which is responsible for religious affairs, said Pope Benedict will propose a trio of candidates for the post, which the president must approve. The pope has the final choice of which of those three becomes military bishop.

Bishop Baseotto had been military bishop since December 2002.

Abortion is illegal in Argentina except if the mother's life is at risk or if a mentally disabled woman is raped, but human rights groups believe there are 500,000 clandestine abortions a year.

Earlier this year Adriana Bortolozzi, a senator from Kirchner's party, presented a draft bill to scrap the post of military bishop, saying "it appears an anachronism ... discriminatory for other faiths and even incompatible with the principle of freedom of religion to continue accepting the intervention of chaplains and bishops in the structure of the armed forces."

Gonzalez defended the role of military bishops, saying they offered pastoral care for military personnel who could not belong to a fixed parish because of their jobs.

"We hope this (draft law) does not go through," he said.