

Pope sends wishes to Greek Orthodox leader

VATICAN CITY - In a message encouraging Catholic-Orthodox dialogue, Pope Benedict XVI sent his personal wishes for the speedy recovery of Greek Orthodox Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens, who was awaiting a liver transplant in Miami.

The pope said Sept. 17 that he wanted to send a "truly special" fraternal greeting to Archbishop Christodoulos, "wishing him the full recovery of health, so that he can resume as soon as possible his pastoral service."

"I assure my prayers for this intention," he added.

Archbishop Christodoulos, 68, has been an important Orthodox dialogue partner for the Vatican. In June, he had surgery for intestinal cancer, and doctors discovered he also suffered from cancer and cirrhosis of the liver. He flew to Miami in mid-August to await a liver transplant at a hospital there.

An official of the Greek Orthodox Church in Athens said Sept. 18 that Archbishop Christodoulos was still on a waiting list for a compatible liver for transplant, but was expected to have the operation by the end of September.

In 2001 it was Archbishop Christodoulos who, despite opposition from some Orthodox priests and bishops, hosted Pope John Paul II during the late pontiff's groundbreaking trip to Athens.

Last year, visiting the Vatican, Archbishop Christodoulos signed a joint declaration with Pope Benedict, pledging "fruitful collaboration" and a "dialogue in truth."

The pope's message was sent to Catholic and Orthodox participants in a Sept. 16-19 dialogue on the Greek island of Tinos. The topic for discussion was St. John Chrysostom, a leading figure of the Eastern church and an early patriarch of Constantinople, who died in September 407, 16 centuries ago.

Pope Benedict noted that in 2004 Pope John Paul returned a portion of the saint's relics from the Vatican to the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople - a gesture appreciated by Orthodox Christians.

The pope said he hoped the scholars meeting on Tinos would help bring the day of full communion between the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

"That blessed day is the one we all look forward to with hope," he said.