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Archbishop Georg Gänswein arrives at the Vatican Jan. 10, 2023.
(CNS/Reuters/Guglielmo Mangiapane)



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April 24, 2024

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The press used to call him the Vatican's George Clooney. Not only for his subtle resemblance to the Hollywood actor, but also for the confident way he used to carry himself. For almost 20 years, German Archbishop Georg Gänswein was close to power as the private secretary to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI.

After Benedict died [on the last day of 2022](#), the now-unemployed archbishop left Rome — but not the spotlight.

Pope Francis and Gänswein are not friends. For Vatican observers, this has been an open secret for many years. There are even rumors Francis' decision after the 2013 conclave to live in the Vatican's Santa Marta guest house instead of the Apostolic Palace was in part to avoid control by Gänswein, who, while remaining the secretary of retired Pope Benedict, also served as the prefect of the official papal household for Francis.

In 2020, Francis removed Gänswein from that position at papal household, [following questions](#) about the archbishop's role in facilitating Benedict's unexpected involvement in a book defending the practice of clerical celibacy.

Shortly after Benedict's death Gänswein retaliated in [a tell-all book](#), describing alleged disagreement between Francis and Benedict. Shortly after the book's publication, Francis had Gänswein give up his apartment in Rome ["for the time being"](#) and return to the place where he last lived decades ago: Freiburg, Germany.



Then-Msgr. Georg Gänswein places a red hat on Pope Benedict XVI as the pope arrives to lead his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican in this Oct. 6, 2010, file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

"I am a nuisance," Gänswein [admitted](#) in a statement to the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, shortly after arriving back in Germany in July 2023. At the moment he is residing in the Freiburg Archdiocese without a permanent job. Yet he is still regularly making headlines.

Freiburg is a city of about 230,000 people, called the "Black Forest capital" and situated close to the French border. Here Gänswein is supposed to occupy a small flat in the archdiocese's seminary. His move-in garnered some attention. Local media and some of his fans had been anticipating his arrival for weeks. One of his first public appearances, a Mass at Freiburg's St. Peter's Church, attracted about 500 visitors, as [a local newspaper reported](#).

Gänswein is one of the most public figures in conservative church circles. People who criticized Francis and his style of government used to rally behind Benedict. Gänswein apparently wants to take up this role. Even though he does not have an

official position he regularly makes public appearances, mostly in conservative circles, praising and defending the works of Benedict.

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He appeared as a "world-famous star guest" (according to the invitation) [last August](#) at Maria Vesperbild, a well-known Marian pilgrimage site in Bavaria. He also celebrated the 75th anniversary of the conservative Catholic newspaper Die Tagespost in Würzburg [around the same time](#).

Not everyone is thrilled about Gänswein's public appearances. An invitation to Madrid last October caused [a minor stir in Spanish media](#). Together with other critics of Francis, he was supposed to inaugurate a "Benedict XVI lecture hall," yet was disinvited on short notice, with some voices calling the event a "conclave against Pope Francis."

Even though the media and public are quite interested in Gänswein, his stint in Freiburg is a delicate matter. "The town of two archbishops," newspapers have [said of the city](#) since the archbishop arrived last summer. To have a high-ranking prelate live in the diocese of another bishop is not unusual, but Freiburg is a special case. The local archbishop, Stephan Burger, is not really a prominent figure outside of his own diocese — he hardly gives interviews or makes public appearances.



Pope Francis meets Archbishop Georg Gänswein, personal secretary to the late Pope Benedict XVI, in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican May 19, 2023. Although he still has the title of prefect of the papal household, Gänswein has not worked in the office since 2020 and is awaiting a new assignment. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Stefan Orth, editor-in-chief of Herder Korrespondenz, a Freiburg-based Catholic magazine, [said recently](#) that some people in the archdiocese "are quite concerned that journalists will keep putting microphones in front of [Gänswein]."

"His statements about the Catholic Church can be quite polarizing," said Orth.

Even though Freiburg at the moment is the home of two archbishops, Gänswein has not been given any official role by the archdiocese. After his arrival, the former papal secretary had an appointment with Burger, with the result that Gänswein celebrates Mass in the local cathedral now and again, and helps out where he might be needed. But explicitly not in an official capacity.

This is not unusual, canon lawyer Georg Bier [told](#) Germany's catholic news agency KNA: "Neither of the archbishops has any obligation, yet they assure their mutual willingness to help out or to ask for help when needed."



Pope Francis shares a laugh with Archbishop Georg Gänswein, secretary to the late Pope Benedict XVI, and with the consecrated women of Memores Domini who cared for the late pope and his household, during a meeting Jan. 3 at the Vatican. The first anniversary of Pope Benedict's death was Dec. 31. (CNS/Vatican Media)

In a way, Georg Gänswein is an archbishop in canonical limbo. Yet this curious situation might end soon, as several newspapers have been speculating over the last couple of weeks. On Jan. 3, almost exactly one year after the death of Benedict XVI, Francis received Gänswein in a private audience.

Officially, nothing of this meeting was made public, yet the pictures show a very happy-looking Gänswein. Rumors say he will take up work as a Vatican ambassador, probably for the Baltic states. If this actually happens remains to be seen, as similar

rumors about him come up every couple of months.

Last year some media outlets were certain Ganswein would be sent to Costa Rica as a papal envoy. Time will tell if the rumors are true this time, and Ganswein can end his canonical limbo state.