

Cardinal urges church to be more democratic

By Philip Pullella

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VATICAN CITY -- In a move certain to spark debate about the choice of the next pope, a leading cardinal has said the Catholic Church should be more democratic, allow women to be deacons and give laypeople a say in selecting bishops.

Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, the former archbishop of Milan, made the maverick suggestions in a wide-ranging interview published last week in the Rome newspaper Il Tempo.

Martini, 77, also said secret conclaves to select popes should not be restricted to cardinals but should include the chairmen of national bishops' conferences in order to make the selection more representative.

The cardinal, who for years before he retired in 2002 was the favorite candidate of liberal Catholics to succeed Pope John Paul II, said power should not be a monopoly of the hierarchy.

In the interview, he called for a "permanent reigning council" to help run the church together with the pope.

As the pope's health has declined, leading clergy have begun a period of informal pre-electoral debate over the main issues in the selection of the next Roman Catholic leader.

One issue will be the next pope's stand on the role of women. The severe shortage of priests in many countries has meant that women have become vital to running many parishes.

Martini stopped short of speaking about women priests but he said women should get more power and influence in the church and that their merits should be "recognized and promoted."

He suggested that the church should study ways of allowing women to be deacons--ordained ministers who cannot celebrate Mass or consecrate Communion but who can read the Gospel, give sermons and assist priests at Mass.

Another conclave issue is "collegiality," or shared decision-making. Liberals have long said church power is too centralized.

Martini said the synod of bishops, which meets every few years, could be more effective, with bishops given more of a decision-making role rather than a consultative role.

"From time to time we should have bishops' meetings that are really universally representative to take up questions in the agenda of the life of the church," he said. "This could help untie those disciplinary and doctrinal knots that occasionally reappear."

Liberals in the church would welcome the possibility of opening up debate about church disciplinary and doctrinal matters, loosening what they feel has been a Vatican stranglehold under the theologically conservative John Paul.

Martini is one of the towering figures of modern Roman Catholicism. He served as rector of two Catholic universities in Rome before becoming archbishop of Milan.

A supporter of "healthy pluralism," Martini also said local people should have a say in the appointment of their bishops.

"The system [of appointing bishops] could be fine-tuned to take the views of the people into consideration," Martini said.

That view is anathema to conservatives who believe that in order to preserve orthodoxy, Church leadership should come from the top.