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90-year-old Maronite patriarch resigns

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VATICAN CITY -- Pope Benedict XVI has accepted the resignation of Lebanese Cardinal Nasrallah P. Sfeir, the 90-year-old head of the Maronite Catholic Church.

In a letter Feb. 26, Pope Benedict said the cardinal began his ministry as patriarch or head of the Maronite Church in 1986, "in the turmoil of the war that bloodied Lebanon for too many years. With the ardent desire for peace for your country, you have guided this church and traveled the world to comfort your people who were forced to emigrate."

"Peace finally came back," the pope said, and while it is "always fragile," it continues to reign in Lebanon.

As the head of an Eastern Catholic Church, Cardinal Sfeir could have served for life but chose to ask the pope to accept his resignation.

In a country where religious identity and political identity often are entwined, Cardinal Sfeir has been criticized at times for being too political, while at other times he was criticized for not engaging directly enough in the practical affairs of the country.

During Lebanon's civil war, Cardinal Sfeir tried to continue the tradition of the Maronite patriarch serving as a reference point of Lebanese cultural identity in a way that would bring the country's Christians and Muslims together; he urged Christians and Muslims to stop fighting, to respect one another and to rebuild the country.

In 1990, during a Christian vs. Christian battle for East Beirut, the cardinal-designate threatened to excommunicate anyone ordering or carrying out a shooting.

In November 1989, supporters of one Christian leader, Gen. Michel Aoun, broke into the patriarch's Beirut offices and ransacked them, dragged the patriarch from his bed and asked him to kiss the general's picture. The cardinal said he refused.

Born May 15, 1920, in Reyfoun, Lebanon, he attended the seminary in Beirut and studied at the theology school of the Jesuit-run St. Joseph University in the capital. He was ordained to the priesthood a week before his 30th birthday.

In 1956, he was named secretary of the patriarchate, and the Maronite bishops elected him to be a bishop in June 1961. They elected him patriarch in 1986, and Pope John Paul II made him a cardinal in 1994.

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