

Doctors say they got tumor in time

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Doctors who removed a colon tumor from Pope John Paul II said they caught the growth before it could become cancerous.

The pope, meanwhile, publicly thanked doctors for their work and well-wishers for their prayers. His recovery continued to go well, a Vatican spokesman said.

A medical bulletin issued July 20 said a final biopsy had confirmed the benign nature of the tumor, but had also found a small core of proliferating cells that showed characteristics of "malign degeneration."

Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls said that term meant the tumor had posed a "situation of risk." But he said no actual cancer cells were found in the tumor, and that no cells showed "invasive behavior."

The doctors found no significant alterations in the pope's lymph nodes — another good sign — and said the affected area of the colon was surrounded by healthy tissue.

The doctors confirmed that the operation could be considered "curative" and said the pope's recovery should be complete.

"We got there in time," said Dr. Luigi Candia, superintendent and acting spokesman at Rome's Gemelli Polyclinic, where the surgery was performed.

The pope made his remarks thanking doctors and well-wishers in an

Angelus talk, pre-recorded in his hospital room and broadcast on Vatican Radio July 19. The comments were his first public remarks after the July 15 operation.

In a voice that was slow but distinct, the 72-year-old pontiff said he had been heartened by the thousands of messages that have poured in from all over the world.

"Thank you! Thanks to the doctors and other personnel at the Gemelli Polyclinic and the Vatican, who have been so attentive and careful regarding my well-being," he said.

"Above all, thank you for the prayers, a most welcome gift and the best way to experience life's difficult and painful moments with faith and serenity," he said.

The pope spoke for about five minutes in all, pausing frequently between words. He ended with a recital of the Angelus, offered with the intention of alleviating "the physical and spiritual suffering of all the sick in the world."

A few hundred people gathered under the pope's hospital window as the message was broadcast, hoping the pontiff would come to his window. Other patients watched and listened from balconies. The pope did not make an appearance.

In St. Peter's Square, several thousand people also heard the pope's recorded message. A week earlier, in a surprise announcement to a crowd gathered in the square, the pope announced that he would enter the hospital for diagnostic tests.

At that time, Vatican sources said,

the pope's doctors knew there was a tumor and believed there was a good chance it was malignant. Biopsies before and during the surgery, however, found no signs of cancer, and the final biopsy results July 20 brought another sigh of relief at the Vatican.

During nearly four hours of surgery, doctors at the Gemelli hospital removed a tumor the size of an orange from the pope's colon, the lower part of the large intestine. When gallstones were discovered during the operation, doctors also removed the pope's gallbladder.

After the surgery, some Italian experts asked why the tumor had not been diagnosed earlier, since it probably took years to develop, they said.

But the pope's surgeon, Dr. Francesco Crucitti, said the tumor had produced no symptoms until a few days before the pope was admitted to the hospital.

"There was no fever, no pain, no bleeding," he said. The pope's medical test results over the last several years were completely normal, he added.

"To prevent this was impossible," he said.

After a monthlong recovery period, the pope should be able to resume his normal work pace and his heavy trip schedule, doctors said. Vatican spokesman Navarro-Valls said the pope would skip a planned September trip to Sicily, but that he was expected to travel to four Latin American countries in October.

The spokesman added, however, that top papal aides had for some time been trying to lighten his annual trip schedule.

"Now it will be up to (the pope) to decide," he said.

The day after his surgery, the pope began meeting regularly with top Vatican officials, including the secretary of



File photo
Pope John Paul II addresses a Rome crowd in 1991. Aides say they have tried for some time to lighten the pope's hectic schedule.

state, Cardinal Angelo Sodano. The meetings were brief, and the pope was not yet dealing with church business, Navarro-Valls said.

On July 20, the pope took his first meal — all liquid — since the operation and was moving around his suite of rooms on Gemelli's 10th floor. He celebrated Mass daily with his personal secretary and read while sitting in a chair, his spokesman said.

"He is weak in the sense that since last Sunday, he hasn't taken any food through the mouth. Now that he's starting with a light diet, which is also physically stimulating, we are entering into a completely normal phase," Navarro-Valls said.

The pope was expected to remain in the hospital until July 25, then spend a month convalescing, probably at his summer residence in Castel Gandolfo. Vatican officials have not ruled out a belated papal vacation in the northern Italian Alps, possibly in late August. The pope was to have spent two weeks there in July.

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