

Pope Benedict defends choice to resign in last public address

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) In his final public address, Pope Benedict XVI on Wednesday (Feb. 27) forcefully defended his decision to resign while trying to reassure Catholics still reeling from the shock of his unprecedented move.

For the first time since his stunning announcement on Feb. 11, the 85-year old pope explained at length his decision to become the first pope in six centuries to resign. His tenure officially ends Thursday at 8 p.m. local time.

Benedict admitted that his resignation is a "grave" and "novel" act but, he added, his choice had been made "with profound serenity."

"Loving the church means having the courage to make difficult, agonizing choices, having ever before oneself the good of the church and not one's own," he said.

In stark contrast to public appearances in recent months when Benedict had looked weak and frail, he spoke forcefully and clearly in front of an estimated crowd of 150,000 gathered in St. Peter's Square to witness his public speech as pope.

Chief Vatican spokesman Rev. Federico Lombardi described the atmosphere in the square as both "emotional" and "serene."

Benedict urged Catholics to keep their hope and trust in the church, reassuring them that it remains "alive" even though "many speak of its decline."

Reflecting on his nearly eight-year-long papacy, Benedict said, "there were moments of joy and light but also moments that were not easy ... there were moments, as there were throughout the history of the Church, when the seas were rough and the wind blew against us and it seemed that the Lord was sleeping."

Benedict also explained that resigning from the papacy won't mean a total return to private life, as being pope is a commitment that lasts "forever."

"I do not abandon the cross," he said, echoing remarks made during the waning days of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, who remained in office despite suffering from Parkinson's disease. Catholic leaders, including John Paul himself, said that he could no more resign than Jesus could come down from the cross.

Benedict said Wednesday that his new role won't entail governing the church but serving it with prayer.

The Vatican says that Benedict will remain "His Holiness" and assume the title of "Pope Emeritus" after his resignation.

Benedict's time in office has been marred by several scandals, from child sex abuse to increased tensions with Jews and Muslims up to the so-called Vatileaks affair, which saw the pope's personal butler steal confidential documents and leak them to the press.

In many instances, the Roman Curia -- the church's central administration -- was blamed for not adequately supporting an intellectual pontiff who never felt completely at ease on the world's stage or in bureaucratic management.

Nevertheless, Benedict stressed that he never felt "alone in bearing either the joys or the weight" of his role.

In fact, in his address Benedict took special care to thank the Curia, and particularly the Vatican secretary of state Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, whose lack of diplomatic experience has been cited as a key factor in the lapses of Benedict's pontificate.

According to Lombardi, about 70 cardinals were in attendance in St. Peter's Square. At least 100 cardinals are expected to be present for Benedict's final farewell on Thursday, he said.