

Pope turns 85 amid speculation of resignation

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c. 2012 Religion News Service VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Benedict XVI turned 85 on Monday (April 16) amid renewed speculation about his declining health and possible resignation.

The German-born pope has appeared tired and fatigued in recent months and admitted at a morning Mass to being in "the final leg of the path of my life." But on Sunday, he signaled his resolve to carry on with his duties as leader of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, asking the faithful to pray that he have the "strength" to "fulfill his mission."

This week will mark a double milestone for Benedict, with Thursday being the seventh anniversary of his election as pope.

Last October, Benedict started using a movable platform to carry him down the central aisle in St. Peter's Basilica, and he leaned on a cane before boarding the plane for a recent weeklong trip to Cuba and Mexico. He is now the sixth-oldest pope since at least the 1400s; the oldest, Pope Leo XIII, died in 1903 at age 93.

Talk of possible resignation has been swirling around the pope ever since his 2010 book, "Light of the World," in which he said that if a pope felt "no longer physically, psychologically, and spiritually capable of carrying out the duties of his office," he would have "the right, and in some circumstances the obligation, to resign."

Last month, prominent Italian journalists who are considered Benedict loyalists openly suggested that the pope might resign in the near future, adding new fuel to the rumor mill.

Still, despite sounding hoarse during the intense liturgical schedule of Holy Week, the pope has not canceled any appointments.

Celebrating Mass with a delegation from his native Bavaria on Monday, an emotional Benedict said he was sure God would help him "proceed safely" despite having entered "the final leg of the path of my life."

"I don't know what the future holds for me but I know that ... God's good is stronger than all the evil in this world," he confided.

He later attended a small Bavarian-style festival in the Vatican. Benedict joined bishops and leaders from his native region in singing the Bavarian national hymn and watched as children performed a traditional dance.

Benedict was joined by his older brother, Monsignor Georg Ratzinger, who flew in last weekend from Germany.

Benedict's predecessor, Pope John Paul II, died in 2005 at age 84 after years of failing health. After his death, it was revealed John Paul considered resigning twice, on his 75th and 80th birthdays, but decided to continue serving "as long as (Jesus), in the mysterious designs of his providence, will want."