

# Pope Benedict XVI seeks prayers in wake of resignation

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) In his first public comments since his surprise retirement announcement, Pope Benedict XVI on Wednesday (Feb. 13) asked Catholics for support and prayers to support him "in these days which are not easy for me."

As he does every Wednesday morning, Benedict presided over the weekly general audience in the Vatican, speaking in front of around 3,500 faithful and tourists.

But before broaching the topic of Lent and Jesus' temptations in his brief Ash Wednesday talk, the 85-year old pontiff tried to explain his decision to become the first pope in 600 years to step down from the papacy.

Benedict said he had felt "almost physically" the strength of prayers to support him in recent days, and asked believers to pray for him, for the church and for his successor.

Looking emotional but in good health, the pontiff said he took the decision to resign "in full freedom" and "for the good of the church."

He said he was "well aware of the gravity of such an act, but at the same time aware of not being able to carry out my (papal) ministry with the physical and spiritual force that it requires."

Benedict stressed that, in taking the historic step, he was supported by the "certainty that the church belongs to Christ, who will never stop guiding it and caring for it."

Later on Wednesday, dozens of cardinals and archbishops, together with priests, nuns and Vatican diplomats flocked to St. Peter's Basilica for Benedict's last Vatican Mass before his retirement.

While the pontiff only passingly referred to his resignation in the Ash Wednesday rite, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, acknowledged the church's "sadness" in an address to Benedict.

"We have all understood that Your Holiness acted out of love for God and for the Church," he said as the pontiff looked on the verge of tears.

Wednesday's rites will be among Benedict's last public events before he steps down on Feb. 28.

According to the Vatican's chief spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, Benedict will keep his usual schedule in his final two weeks as pope, including meetings with visiting bishops and heads of state.

On Thursday, Benedict will meet with Rome's clergy, a traditional papal appointment during Lent.

Benedict has granted special audiences to Italian President Giorgio Napolitano, with whom he forged a strong relationship in past years, and to outgoing Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti, who is currently engaged in Italy's bitter electoral campaign ahead of general elections later this month.

The pope will also attend a Vatican spiritual retreat from Feb. 17-23 before presiding at the Wednesday general audience on Feb. 27, his last public appearance as pope. "We are expecting on a large turnout," Lombardi said.

On his last day as pope, Feb. 28, Benedict will meet cardinals for a farewell audience in the Vatican before flying by helicopter to the papal villa in Castel Gandolfo, outside of Rome, where he will stay as the cardinals chose his successor.

According to Lombardi, church law states that a conclave should be held 15 to 20 days after the end of the previous pontificate. "Cardinals must reflect and gather information in order to be prepared when the conclave arrives," he said.

Benedict's future status features prominently among the unresolved issues the Church faces in the coming weeks.

His title as former pope, his place of residence, down to the color of the vests he will wear, "are not trivial questions, as they have a symbolic and juridical significance that must be taken into account," Lombardi admitted.