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World

Pope Benedict XVI hints at infighting within Vatican

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Vatican City: Two days after announcing his resignation, Pope Benedict XVI on Wednesday attended his last Mass in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

As he presided over the solemn ceremony of Ash Wednesday, teary-eyed Bishops doffed their mitres and applause filled the church.

Ash Wednesday marks the start of Lent, the most solemn season on the church's liturgical calendar that ends with Holy Week.

In his final homily as pontiff, Benedict hinted at infighting between the clerics existing inside the Vatican.

Benedict called for a united church that isn't "defiled" by internal rivalries, saying, "Each Christian is called to bear witness to the faith. I think in particular of the attacks against the unity of the church, to the divisions in the ecclesial body".

"Experiencing Lent in a more intense and evident ecclesial union, moving beyond individualisms and rivalries, is a humble and precious sign for those who have drifted from the faith or are indifferent to it."

The basilica erupted in a rousing standing ovation as Benedict exited for the last time as pope, bringing tears to the eyes of some of those closest to him.

"We wouldn't be sincere, Your Holiness, if we didn't tell you that there's a veil of sadness on our hearts this evening," Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Benedict's longtime deputy, told the pope at the end of the service, his voice breaking.

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Earlier in the day, the scene was festive as Benedict took the extraordinary step of speaking directly to the faithful about why he had broken with 600 years of tradition and decided to retire on Feb. 28.

"As you know, I have decided to renounce the ministry that the Lord gave to me on April 19, 2005," Benedict told thousands gathered for the traditional Wednesday general audience. "I did this in full liberty for the good of the church."

He expressed gratitude for the prayers and love of his flock, which he said he "physically felt in these days that haven't been easy for me." And he asked them to "continue to pray for me, the church, and the future pope."

Benedict was greeted with a standing ovation when he entered the packed hall, and his speech was interrupted repeatedly by applause.

A huge banner reading "Grazie Santita" — "Thank you Your Holiness" — was strung up and a chorus of Italian schoolchildren serenaded him with one of his favorite hymns in German — a gesture that moved the pope to thank them for singing a piece "particularly dear to me."

He appeared wan and spoke softly, but his eyes twinkled at the welcome.

Benedict's final official acts as pope will include audiences with the Romanian and Guatemalan presidents this week and the Italian president on Feb. 23. His final general audience is Feb. 27.

Benedict's last appearances as pontiff are expected to draw large crowds for what may well be some of the last speeches by a man who has spent his life — as a priest, a cardinal and a pope — teaching and preaching.

Pope announced Monday that he would be resigning from the papacy on Feb 28 due to poor health and spiritual conditions.

A new pope would be elected by a papal conclave by March 15 at the Sistine Chapel.

With Agency Inputs

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