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Rome says goodbye to its bishop

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 17, 2013 NCR Today
Benedict Resigns
Rome

Benedict XVI?s farewell tour began this week, including a three-minute plus eruption of applause at the Ash Wednesday service, one that might never have ended if the pope himself hadn?t cut it short by saying ?Let?s get back to the prayer,? and a love fest with the priests of Rome on Thursday.

Today saw a massive outpouring of affection for Benedict during his regular Sunday Angelus address, which drew tens of thousands of people to St. Peter?s Square and the surrounding area, perhaps as many as 100,000. Traffic had been closed off in the zone earlier in the morning, and extra police were deployed to handle security.

Facing banners reading ?We love you!? and simply ?Thanks!?, amid what one TV commentator described as an ?ocean of humanity,? a smiling Benedict delivered his regular Sunday teaching. At the end, once again cutting short the applause, the pope said in Italian, ?Thank you ? thank you ? thank all of you,? and then launched into his summaries in various languages.

While Benedict?s final general audience on Feb. 27 shapes up as a chance for the whole world to say goodbye, today had more of the feel of a send-off for the Bishop of Rome from his local flock. A delegation composed of the Mayor of Rome, Gianni Alemanno, and the city council was on hand, and the overflow crowd was largely composed of Romans.

Back in 2005, the election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI was greeted by the world as a choice for a German pope, but many Romans actually saw him as one of their own. Ratzinger had lived in the city for more than twenty years as head of the Vatican?s doctrinal office, he?s fluent in Italian, and almost every restaurant owner in town can point you to a table where the pope once sat.

As a result, today was a chance to see off a longtime fixture on the Roman scene.

?Thank you for coming out in such big numbers!? the pope told the crowd. ?This too is a sign of the affection and the spiritual closeness that?s being shown to me in these days. In particular, I salute the administration of the capital city, led by the mayor, and with him I salute and thank all the inhabitants of this beloved city.?

Benedict?s brief teaching for the day was couched as a reflection on the temptations faced by Jesus as described in the New Testament. A few key lines, however, seemed to carry subtext with respect to Benedict?sdecision to renounce the papacy.

?In the decisive moments of life, if you look carefully, in every minute, we face a crossroads: Do we want to follow the ?I?, or God?? the pope said.

Arguing that the temptations placed before Jesus were designed to suggest that ?the true realities are power and whatever satisfies our primary needs,? Benedict called on Christians to spurn ?pride and egoism, in order to live

in love.?

In English, Benedict summarized his reflection and then added: ?Let me also thank you for the prayers and support you have shown me in these days. May God bless all of you!?

At the end, Benedict said, ?Let?s remain united in prayer,? and in a typical flourish stepped away from the window while the applause was still echoing in the square. The entire appearance lasted sixteen minutes.

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