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People wait in line to enter St. Peter's Basilica to view the body of Pope Benedict XVI at the Va

People wait in line to enter St. Peter's Basilica to view the body of Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican Jan. 2, 2023. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



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Vatican City — January 2, 2023
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Thousands of people from around the world began to pay their final respects to the late Pope Benedict XVI on Jan. 2, as his body was transferred into St. Peter's Basilica from the Vatican monastery where he resided for nearly ten years after his surprise resignation from the papacy in 2013.

The retired pope, who died on Dec. 31, arrived in the basilica at 7:15 a.m. Central European Time, where Italian Cardinal Mauro Gambetti, archpriest of St. Peter's Basilica and vicar general for Vatican State, presided over a brief blessing of the body, before the church doors opened at 9:00 a.m.

Residents of Rome — including Italian President Sergio Mattarella and Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni — were among the first to pay their respects, soon joined by pilgrims

and tourists alike.

"I was really young when he was pope," 25-year-old Chelsea Hernandez, who was visiting from Tijuana, Mexico, told NCR. "I know more about Francis, to be honest. But once you're in there, you're just grateful to be able to experience this."

"Growing up you hear so much about role models and saints," she added. "It's amazing to be able to see so many people gather and celebrate Pope Benedict and celebrate the church."

Fr. Ben Valentine of Dubuque, Iowa, said he just happened to be in Rome on an already scheduled pilgrimage when he heard the news of the retired pope's death.

Valentine, who was ordained to the priesthood earlier this year, said it was in the seminary that he began to learn more about Pope Benedict XVI, and in particular, his theological works.

"For me, I just see him as someone with so much depth to his theology," he said. "He unfolds the riches of the church in a way that's so attractive, so beautiful."

Valentine recalled a quote from Benedict's inauguration as pope in 2005 – after the former German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected pope by the cardinals following the death of Pope John Paul II – where the-then new pontiff told those gathered in St. Peter's Square: "Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything."

Now, nearly 20 years later and standing in that same square awaiting the opportunity to pay tribute to the man who inspired him with those words, Valentine said, "I've repeated that line so many times, that's my experience in life."

The body of Pope Benedict XVI lies in St. Peter's Basilica during a Rite of Reception in the earl

The body of Pope Benedict XVI lies in St. Peter's Basilica during a Rite of Reception in the early morning at the Vatican Jan. 2, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

Italian police estimate that some 30,000 people will make their way through St. Peter's Basilica each day for the opportunity to visit, which will last through Wednesday, Jan. 4. The following day, Pope Francis will preside over the funeral

Mass, which will take place in St. Peter's Square, marking the first time in modern history where a current pope has presided over the funeral of his predecessor.

The Vatican released the first images of the late pope's body on Jan. 1, in repose in the Mater Ecclesiae Monastery chapel. There, as he is in the basilica, Benedict was dressed with a miter, red vestments and black shoes, but without the pallium worn by active metropolitan archbishops.

Archbishop Anthony Fisher of Sydney, Australia noted on his Facebook page that Benedict was wearing the same chasuble that he wore when he celebrated the final Mass at World Youth Day in Sydney in 2008, and that the Vatican confirmed that Benedict would be buried in it.

"Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI remarked to me on many occasions how much he loved his visit to Sydney to celebrate World Youth Day in 2008," wrote Fisher, who was responsible for organizing that visit. "What a wonderful tribute."

As the first visitors arrived in St. Peter's on Monday, Jan. 2 — from places as far apart as Finland, India and Australia — most had only a few seconds in front of the body as it rested in front of the basilica's main altar, as organ music and a choir sang in the background.

Outside, the unusually warm and sunny weather enjoyed over the holiday weekend in Rome had turned into a slight chill with overcast skies, though the line moved briskly, with most pilgrims waiting around an hour from the time they entered security to enter the church.

As he waited his turn to enter the basilica, Jacob Francois, a 25-year-old seminarian at Mundelein seminary in Illinois, told NCR that he believed Benedict served as "the perfect successor to John Paul II's papacy" and lived up to his pledge "to be a humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord."

"He really followed through with that," said Francois, specifically citing Benedict's shock abdication. "It's a beautiful testament to the Petrine office as a whole that he wanted due diligence, that he wanted it to be taken care of."

Francois was joined by two other seminarians who said that not only did they plan to bid a final farewell to the late pope on Monday, but that they planned to also attend the funeral on Thursday.

"We are very excited to pray at the tomb of someone who we believe is a great saint and a possible doctor of the church," said the seminarian.

The body of the late Pope Benedict XVI is transferred to St. Peter's Basilica in the early morni

The body of the late Pope Benedict XVI is transferred to St. Peter's Basilica in the early morning at the Vatican Jan. 2, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

Daughters of St. Paul Sr. Rose Pacatte said that she found the whole experience of paying tribute to the late pope and watching others do so as "extraordinary."

As a U.S. sister (and also an NCR contributor, who is currently living in Rome), she recalled that when Benedict was first elected pope she was disappointed at the cardinals' choice of the former prefect of the Vatican's doctrinal congregation.

"As the years went by, I saw him in a bit of a different light," she told NCR, especially citing the influence of his writings and his messages on communications.

"I am cognizant of his missteps, and his approach to doctrine and Catholic life," she noted, "but I am still extremely inspired and impressed by his courage to resign when he did because he knew it was time that someone else could do the pastoral work better than him. He had given everything and it was time to hand it over. That’s extraordinary."

Max Thompson, a 22-year-old tourist from Washington, D.C., said he wasn't too surprised by the pomp and circumstance, since he grew up in the U.S. capital and that it reminded him of when a president dies, or, more recently, the death of Queen Elizabeth II.

"I'm not religious," he said, adding that he had already planned to visit the basilica to take in the art and architecture. "But now I'm here to observe history."

This story appears in the **The Ratzinger/Benedict XVI legacy** feature series. View the full series.