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On Ash Wednesday, Benedict starts framing his legacy

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NCR Today

Benedict Resigns

Rome — Having established Feb. 28 as the end of his papacy, Benedict XVI now has two weeks to leave a final imprint on the church, conscious that every word he says for the next two weeks and every act he performs will be among his last.

One has to imagine that Benedict will use these opportunities to stress a few themes particularly dear to his heart, which will both help sum up his own papacy and, perhaps, help sketch a path for his successor.

In effect, the pope's record over the next two weeks amounts to a final chance to frame his own legacy.

On Wednesday, Benedict celebrated what will be his last major public liturgy in St. Peter's Basilica, the Mass for Ash Wednesday. Surrounded by a host of cardinals and other senior prelates, Benedict delivered what will be his last major homily as pope.

In this unique setting, Benedict struck several characteristic themes.

Most notably, Benedict placed special emphasis on the importance of the church. Faith is not just an individual journey, he argued, but one that unfolds in the community founded by Christ.

"The communitarian dimension is an essential element in the faith and in the Christian life," he said. "The 'we' of the church is the community in which Jesus gathers us together."

"The faith," the pope said, "is necessarily ecclesial."

This accent has long been a leitmotif of Benedict's thought, who over the years has often lamented what

he sees as a modern tendency to say "yes" to Jesus but "no" to the church. In contrast, Benedict has always insisted that saying "yes" to Jesus necessarily implies a "yes" to the church -- and thus acceptance of its teachings and discipline.

On another front, Benedict said the church is supposed to lift up the face of Christ, but that this face is sometimes "disfigured" by "faults against unity" and by "divisions within the ecclesial body."

That, too, is a standard note for Benedict, one he often strikes in the context of expressing support for ecumenical efforts, particularly directed at the Orthodox.

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The reference to the importance of unity in the church may also carry significance in the context of Benedict's repeated efforts to reach out to traditionalist Catholics, especially the breakaway Society of St. Pius X founded by the late French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. Benedict has struggled to defend this outreach, despite the fact that so far reconciliation with the traditionalists has not arrived.

Finally, Benedict also stressed the importance of the Bible in Christian life, urging Catholics to use Lent to pursue "a more attentive and assiduous listening to the Word of God."

Benedict has been in many ways a very "scriptural" pope. He convened a Synod of Bishops on the Bible in 2008, and he published three books on the life of Christ, featuring a close reading of the New Testament gospels.

The pope also hinted at a spiritual reading of his decision to step off the stage, saying toward the end of his homily that "our witness [as Christians] will always be more effective the less we seek our own glory."

At the end of the Mass, Benedict's most senior aide, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State, offered a brief tribute.

Bertone said Benedict's decision shows his "deep love" for God and the church, as well as Benedict's "purity of heart," "robust faith," and his "humility" and "great courage."

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