

Pope Benedict XVI waves as he leaves St. Peter's Square after his weekly general audience at the Vatican March 29. The pope said that living in communion with God is the source of unity among people. (CNS photo/Reuters)



With Benedict, world sees new side of papacy

By JOHN THAVIS
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VATICAN CITY - This month, the Church marked the first anniversary of the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of Pope Benedict XVI, events that captured the world's attention and introduced a new style of papacy.

Thousands gathered to pray in St. Peter's Square the evening of April 2, a poignant reminder of the vigil outside the late pope's window on that date last year, when a hushed crowd was told the pontiff had "returned to the house of the Father."

His successor has used a simple and direct approach to win over the record crowds that are flocking to his appearances at the Vatican and elsewhere. Quietly and slowly, in more than 200 sermons and speeches, he has engaged the faithful and the wider society on fundamental issues of truth, freedom, faith and human dignity.

In some ways, it has taken a full year for the papal transition - a year to absorb the legacy of Pope John Paul's long pontificate and a year for Pope Benedict's papacy to come into focus.

The new pope found himself presiding over many events scheduled under his predecessor, like the Synod of Bishops last October, several canonizations, the closing of the eucharistic year, and numerous meetings and liturgies.

Pope Benedict has eased gently into his role. Those who hoped for tough new doctrinal pronouncements, wholesale removal of liberal bishops and a rollback in liturgical reform have been disappointed.

The pope's only major document so far has been an encyclical that focused on what he called the foundation of the Christian message, "God is love," and its implications for personal and institutional charity.

The much-discussed Vatican document barring men with



Pope Benedict XVI wears a "camauro," a red velvet cap trimmed with ermine, as he arrives to lead his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Dec. 21, 2005. He was the first pontiff since John XXIII to don the cap, and many people initially thought the image of Benedict in the elf-like head gear was an Internet-generated joke. (CNS photo from Reuters)

deep-seated homosexual tendencies from the priesthood, although approved by Pope Benedict, was a project inherited from the previous pontificate.

The long-rumored tsunami of replacements in the Roman Curia has not hit yet. The pope's only major appointment came last May, when he named U.S. Archbishop William J. Levada as head of the doctrinal congregation and later named him a cardinal.

But in March, the pope made his first move to streamline Vatican offices. At least temporarily, the council dealing with

migration was combined with the justice and peace council, and the council that dialogues with non-Christian religions - including Muslims - was combined with the council for culture. The final alignment of curial offices is not yet clear, and the changes may take months, but most expect a significant shrinking of the number of agencies.

For the last year, however, Pope Benedict's priorities have not been administrative. Instead, he has embarked on what might be described as a project to water the roots of the faith.

He has urged Catholics to rediscover Christ as the focus of their personal lives and to resist the tendency to make the individual ego "the only criterion" for their choices. The pope has been careful to phrase this as a sympathetic invitation and not a warning.

"We continually close our doors; we continually want to feel secure and do not want to be disturbed by others and by God" - and yet still Christ will come for his people, the pope said in a sermon last May.

As a teacher, he has turned to Scripture far more than doctrine, making connections between the early Christians of apostolic times and modern men and women struggling to live their faith.

Pope Benedict has tackled contemporary social and political issues by emphasizing a few main principles: that human rights rest on human dignity, that people come before profits, that the right to life is an ancient measure of humanity and not just a Catholic teaching, and that efforts to exclude God from civil affairs are corroding modern society.

He returns often to a central theme - the relationship between God and man - in language that can be clear-cut and gripping.

"Human life is a relationship ... and the basic relationship is with the Creator, otherwise all relationships are fragile. To choose God, that is the essential thing. A world emptied of God, a world that has forgotten God, loses life and falls into a culture of death," the pope said in a talk in March.

He has zeroed in on what he has called Europe's spiritual fatigue, occasionally rattling the cages and rallying the forces on issues like gay marriage, cohabitation and abortion.

The pope's style - deliberate and thoughtful - was seen in the way he took up residence in the Apostolic Palace. He commissioned a lengthy remodeling of the papal apartment, and only in December did he really move in, along with his 20,000 books.

It impressed people at the Vatican that the pope took the time to meet separately with the often-overlooked groups of employees who serve him every day, including ushers, papal gentlemen, members of the papal antechamber and the Vatican's security force.

Pope Benedict has had an overwhelmingly favorable reception, too, among the tens of thousands of pilgrims who come to see him each week. When he moves through a crowd, he seems to look people in the eye.

Last year, when the pope waived the normal five-year waiting period for the start of Pope John Paul II's sainthood cause, he showed he was sensitive to the popular voice of the church.

Earlier this month, when the crowds gathered to pray in St. Peter's Square, he joined them in remembering the late pontiff and the dramatic events set in motion by his death.



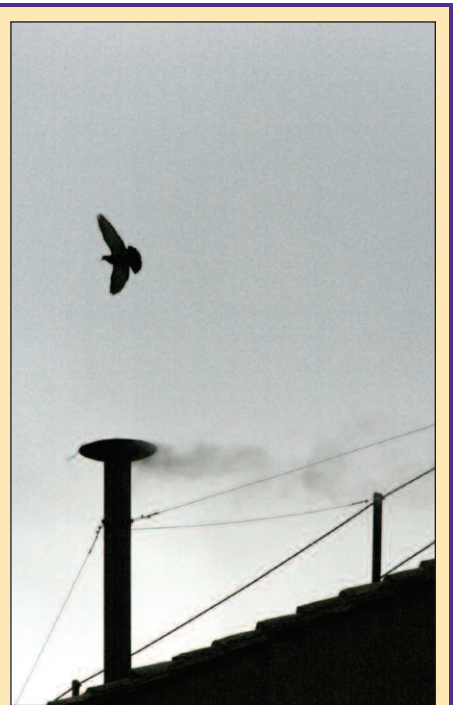
Hometown musicians celebrate

Musicians in traditional Bavarian costume play instruments during celebrations April 19, 2005, in the Bavarian town of Marktlam Inn, Germany, the birthplace of newly elected Pope Benedict XVI. (CNS photo from Reuters)



World Youth Day visit

Shortly after he was elected, Pope Benedict XVI announced that he would continue the tradition of his predecessor by attending World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany. Traveling to his homeland on his first international trip as pontiff, he also met with Jewish and Muslim leaders in Cologne, setting the tone for an ecumenical papacy. In this photo, Pope Benedict walks with youths from Latin America and Africa in Cologne Aug. 18, 2005. (CNS photo from Catholic Press Photo, Pool)



White smoke pours from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel signifying the election of Pope Benedict XVI April 19, 2005, at the Vatican. The color of the smoke left uncertainty as to whether a new pope had been elected, but within a few minutes a bell on St. Peter's Basilica began pealing, indicating a new pope had been elected. (CNS photo from KNA)

Transition was 'a moment of grace'

VATICAN CITY (CNS) - A year ago, in a series of dramatic events spanning three weeks, the Church and the world said goodbye to Pope John Paul II and welcomed a newly elected Pope Benedict XVI.

They were hectic days. The Vatican found itself besieged by pilgrims and media as it organized Pope John Paul's funeral liturgies and prepared to elect his successor.

Looking back, despite all the logistical problems, Vatican officials believe the papal transition was a moment of grace. The papal funeral, broadcast to more than 100 countries, impressed those inside and outside the Church.

"I think we gave the world an image of a Church that believes in Resurrection when its pastor died," said one official who helped with the funeral rites.

With Pope Benedict's election, the Church began a new chapter - accompanied by the excitement of white smoke and the first papal blessing from the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica.