

Beat: Health

Pope Benedict XVI says he will resign on February 28 due to old age

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USPA News - Pope Benedict XVI surprised the world on Monday when he said he no longer has the mental and physical strength to adequately exercise his duties as head of the Catholic Church, making him the first pontiff to resign the papal office in nearly 600 years. The 85-year-old pope made the shocking announcement during a meeting of cardinals at the Vatican, surprising even his closest aides.

"After having repeatedly examined my conscience before God, I have come to the certainty that my strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry," he said. The pope's brother, Georg Ratzinger, told the dpa news agency that Benedict XVI had recently been advised by his doctor to refrain from taking transatlantic trips. "My brother wants more rest at this age," Ratzinger said, adding that the pope had been considering to resign for a number of months. Cardinals elected Benedict XVI as pope in April 2005 following the death of Pope John Paul II, who became one of the most beloved popes in Catholic history. John Paul II remained pope until his death at the age of 84 after a long battle with Parkinson's disease and other ailments. In his statement, Benedict XVI added: "In order to govern the bark of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary, strength which in the last few months, has deteriorated in me to the extent that I have had to recognize my incapacity to adequately fulfill the ministry entrusted to me." The pope said his resignation will take effect at 8 p.m. local time (1900 GMT) on February 28. "I declare that I renounce the ministry of Bishop of Rome, Successor of Saint Peter, entrusted to me by the Cardinals on 19 April 2005," he said. "The See of Rome, the See of Saint Peter, will be vacant and a Conclave to elect the new Supreme Pontiff will have to be convoked by those whose competence it is." Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi told reporters that Benedict XVI will remain in full charge of the church until the evening of February 28. He said the decision to resign was not made because of any difficulties in within the church or because of a specific illness, but merely because of the pope's advancing age. Benedict XVI thanked cardinals for their love and work and asked pardon for his defects. "Let us entrust the Holy Church to the care of Our Supreme Pastor, Our Lord Jesus Christ, and implore his holy Mother Mary, so that she may assist the Cardinal Fathers with her maternal solicitude, in electing a new Supreme Pontiff," he said. Lombardi said the election of a new pope is expected to take place before the end of March, but that Benedict XVI will not take part in the process. Benedict XVI is instead expected to travel to his summer residence in the Italian town of Castel Gandolfo in March before moving to a cloistered residence in the Vatican. "I wish to also devotedly serve the Holy Church of God in the future through a life dedicated to prayer," the pope said. It will make Benedict XVI the first pontiff to resign the papal office in nearly 600 years, and the seventh in the church's history. The last pontiff to resign was Gregory XII who did so in July 1415 to end a civil war within the church in which more than one man claimed to be the pope. But at least three more recent popes had also prepared for a possible resignation, which must be voluntary in accordance with church law. Pope Pius VII signed a conditional resignation letter in 1804 before setting out for France to crown Napoleon as Emperor of the French. The resignation would have taken effect if Pius VII had been imprisoned during his trip. Pope Pius XII also drew up a similar document during World War II. The letter said his resignation would take effect immediately if he were kidnapped by the Nazis and instructed church leaders to flee to a safe country such as neutral Portugal to re-establish the church's leadership and appoint a new pontiff. Pope John Paul II also wrote a resignation letter in February 1989 during the Cold War. In the letter, the pontiff said he would resign from the papal office if he had an incurable disease that would prevent him from exercising his duties or in the case of "severe and prolonged impairment."

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