

Pope presides over Easter Vigil Mass

Love is 'stronger than evil,' pontiff tells thousands at St. Peter's Basilica

MSNBC News Services

Updated: 8:45 p.m. ET April 7, 2007

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI presided over a candlelit Easter Vigil Mass in St. Peter's Basilica Saturday night, ushering in the most important event of Christian Church calendar with a lengthy service attended by thousands.

The German Pontiff walked solemnly as he began the service in the atrium of the largest church in Christendom, where he carved the Greek letters Alpha and Omega on a large candle.

The basilica, which was kept in darkness, became a sea of flickers as the congregation lit thousands of candles before the lights were turned on.

The gesture symbolized the darkness in the world after Christ's death and the light of the Easter resurrection.

In his homily the Pope, wearing gold and white vestments, said the resurrection of Christ lent hope to humanity -- even in its darkest moments.

"In the resurrection of Jesus, love has been shown to be stronger than death, stronger than evil," the Pope said.

He prayed that God would "descend into the darkness and abyss of our modern age, and take by the hand those who await (God). Bring them to the light."

The Pontiff, who turns 80 this month, also baptized eight new members of the Church, six adult converts and two children. They were from China, Cuba, Cameroon, Japan and Italy.

All of the adults were women -- a selection which followed Good Friday ceremonies that focused repeatedly on women, their historic role in the Church and the abuses they have endured in society.

The Pope on Friday listened to a meditation during the Via Crucis (Way of the Cross) procession about women being marginalized, and mothers raising children in countries at war.

Earlier on Friday, he heard a sermon by a Vatican preacher expressing hope that the world would enter an "era of the woman, of heart, of compassion."

Saturday's service was attended by more than 10,000 people inside the basilica, and broadcast to television stations in 40 countries.

The Church considers the period between Good Friday, which commemorates Jesus' crucifixion, and Easter Sunday, which marks his resurrection, as the most important of all vigils.

Tens of thousands of faithful are expected to flock to St. Peter's Square early Sunday for the pope's Easter Mass and later to hear his "Urbi et Orbi" message delivered from the basilica's central balcony on the square. The message -- "to the city and to the world" -- is an occasion for the pope to talk about international crises, moral issues and other concerns of the Church.

Benedict presided over two, long back-to-back public ceremonies on Good Friday, including an afternoon Mass and a late-night Way of the Cross procession at the Colosseum to mark Jesus' suffering and death by crucifixion.

The Via Crucis procession is a Good Friday ritual in many parts of the world.

At the end of Good Friday in the southern Italian city of Naples, Cardinal Crescenio Sepe presided over the burning of a pile of guns, knives and other weapons that had been turned in over past months after he appealed to gangsters to change their ways. Organized crime turf wars have flared in Naples for years, sometimes claiming innocent bystanders as their victims.

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