

# Pope, Former Pope Meet in First Such Encounter in 600 Years

A reigning pope and a former pope faced each other for the first time in at least 600 years on Saturday when Pope Francis traveled south of Rome for lunch with his predecessor, pope emeritus Benedict XVI.

Francis, who was elected on March 13, flew by helicopter to the papal summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, where Benedict has been living since he abdicated on Feb. 28.

Footage released by the Vatican showed the two men, both dressed in nearly identical white clerical garb, including white skull caps, embracing shortly after the helicopter landed at the large estate.

The only difference in garb is that Francis also wears a short white cape over his cassock and a white sash around his waist – both symbols of his authority. On Saturday Benedict, who often suffered from chills, even indoors, wore a thick white vest over his cassock.

They then rode in the same car to the residence where they prayed together, spoke alone for about 45 minutes and then had lunch accompanied by their two secretaries. Vatican spokesman Father Federico Lombardi said the atmosphere for the entire visit, which lasted just under three hours, was “family-like”.

When they went to pray in the chapel, Benedict offered the place of honor, a kneeler before the altar, to Francis, who declined, saying, “We are brothers, we pray together,” Lombardi said. Footage showed the two men praying at the same pew.

Asked about the health of Benedict, who became the first pope in 600 years to resign instead of ruling for life, citing diminishing strength, Lombardi said: "It is normal, he is an old man."

Benedict has been living temporarily in the summer residence in the Alban Hills and will move back to the Vatican after the restoration of a convent where he is expected to live for the rest of his life.

Shortly before his resignation, Benedict, now 85, said he would be "withdrawing into prayer" and would live out his remaining days "hidden from the world".

In February, on the last day of his nearly eight years as leader of the Catholic Church, Benedict pledged his unconditional obedience to whoever would succeed him. Lombardi said the meeting "gave Benedict the opportunity, through his gestures" to renew his pledge personally.

While Lombardi said there would be no statement on what the two discussed, it was likely that the conversation included problems of Vatican administration.

## LEAKS SCANDAL

Before he resigned, Benedict left a secret report for Francis on the so-called "Vatileaks" scandal in which sensitive papal documents were stolen from the pope's desk and leaked to the media by his butler.

Last year, the butler, Paolo Gabriele, was arrested and sentenced by a Vatican court to 18 months in prison but Benedict pardoned him and he was freed last Christmas.

The presence of a reigning pope and a pope emeritus is new for the Church in the modern era, but experts say it should not cause difficulties unless Benedict tries to influence Francis's decisions, something he has promised not to do.

Some Church scholars worry that in the event that Francis undoes some of Benedict's policies while he is still alive, the former pope could become a lightning rod for conservatives and polarize the Church.

"Benedict XVI could turn into a shadow pope who has stepped down but can still exert indirect influence," Hans Kung, a dissident Swiss theologian who has clashed with Benedict in the past, told a German magazine.

Francis, who inherited a Church riven by problems such as the sexual abuse scandal in many countries, has indicated in his first few days that his papacy will be more austere.

He wants the Church to be poorer and to be closer to the poor and suffering. In this vein, he has decided to hold Holy Thursday service next week in a juvenile jail on Rome's outskirts rather than in the Vatican or in a Rome Basilica, where it has been held by all his predecessor in living memory.

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