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Pope Benedict XVI: God told me to resign

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Aug. 21, 2013
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When Pope Benedict XVI announced his resignation in February, he made it very clear he had done so only after intense prayer and said he intended to live the rest of his life praying and studying.

Vatican officials and Vatican watchers were surprised in late August when a report circulated that Pope Benedict had told an anonymous visitor that his decision was the result of some form of extraordinary "mystical experience" rather than a decision made after long and careful thought and deep prayer. Catholics traditionally would consider that kind of intense prayer a "mystical experience," though not something extraordinary.

Those skeptical of the report, carried in the Italian service of the Zenit news agency, quoted Pope Benedict's explanation in his own announcement Feb. 11: "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 also told the cardinals he wanted to dedicate the rest of his life to serving the church through his prayers.

Since stepping down Feb. 28, retired Pope Benedict has led a very quiet life, far from the public eye, though he did accept Pope Francis' invitation to be present July 5 for the dedication of a statue in the Vatican Gardens.

Living in a remodeled monastery in the Vatican Gardens, he occasionally welcomes visitors, especially friends, former students and small groups accompanying former students. The meetings are private and rarely reported in the news.

In a report Monday, Zenit said someone who had visited Pope Benedict "a few weeks ago" had asked him why he resigned. "God told me to," the retired pope was quoted as responding before "immediately clarifying that it was not any kind of apparition or phenomenon of that kind, but rather 'a mystical experience' in which the Lord gave rise in his heart to an 'absolute desire' to remain alone with him in prayer."

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