

Giving Thanks Through Prayer

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Over the course of the last month, as Pope John Paul II died and was buried, as the cardinal electors gathered to choose a successor and as Pope Benedict XVI was introduced to the world, Catholics have been called upon to offer special prayers.

As I traveled around the Diocese of Charlotte after the selection of Pope Benedict, many news reporters have asked me the same question: "Why are you gathering to pray? After all, the pope has been elected; what is done is done."

It is a good question. This special prayer journey for the Catholic Church actually began on April 2 when our beloved Holy Father, John Paul, a true servant of God until the very end, passed from this life. There was an emptiness in the days after John Paul's death. The visible center of our unity, the father of the family of the Church, had been taken away from us.

We gathered in large numbers to pray for the repose of John Paul's soul. The world watched in awe as millions of pilgrims flocked to Rome to pay a final tribute to this humble and holy man.

Then we gathered as a diocesan family to pray for the cardinal electors as they met to choose a successor to St. Peter. Our hearts yearned for a new shepherd. As I was preparing to celebrate a Mass at the Cathedral of St. Patrick in Charlotte on the second day of the conclave, I learned that the Holy Spirit's guidance to the electors had come quickly. We had a new pope!

The news was met with a spontaneous outbreak of applause in the cathedral. The same joy was evident on the faces of the thousands who gathered in St. Peter's Square to greet Benedict XVI.

And finally, in the days after the selection of Pope Benedict we gathered to give thanks at special diocesan Masses in Charlotte, Winston-Salem and Asheville. Whenever we ask for a gift from God, we always return to give thanks.

We pray also for the new pope, so that he may have the strength to carry on the responsibilities as the vicar of Christ on Earth. We pray for his health and we pray that God will grant him wisdom as he guides the flock of 1.1 billion Catholics all over the world.

I was struck by the words of the Holy Father as he delivered his homily at the Mass of investiture. With the eyes of the world on him as the symbols of the office of pope were conferred, he asked us to pray for him, not once, but three times.

He said, "Pray for me so that I will learn to love the Lord more and more. Pray for me so that I will learn to love the flock more and more." And finally he said, "Pray for me, that I may not flee for fear of the wolves."

Our new Holy Father is fully aware of the evil and the dangers that lurk in our world. He describes those dangers as deserts:

"There is the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst, the desert of abandonment, of loneliness, of destroyed love. There is the desert of God's darkness, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life. The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast."

It is wonderful to know that Pope Benedict XVI began his ministry as our shepherd by reminding us that prayer can turn those evil deserts into an oasis of God's love.

And so we have prayed in sadness, in hope and in thanks. Now let us pray in joy for our new pope, Benedict XVI, who describes himself as, "a simple, humble worker in the Lord's vineyard."

Let us go forward with him, confident in the risen Lord's help.