

By Fr. John Franck, A.A., Assistant general

On a brilliant late winter day, between 150,000-200,000 people thronged into St. Peter's Square and the boulevard connecting it with the Tiber River, to bid farewell to a pope who had made history just a short time earlier by announcing his decision to step down as bishop of Rome, the first pontiff in modern history to do so. Flags from dozens of countries, banners from parishes near and far, multi-colored scarves from schools and colleges, huge signs from various Church movements dotted the Square and added to the festive climate of the occasion.

The Assumption Family was well represented at this historic event: members of the general house community, sisters of the larger Assumption Family, students from Assumption College's Rome campus, and journalists form various Assumptionist-sponsored magazines such as *Le Pèlerin*

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When Benedict finally arrived in the familiar Pope-mobile, it was evident from the huge screens that conveyed his every move that the aging Pontiff was lifted high on the enthusiastic cheers and applause of the crowds. He would say later, "The pope is never alone, and I can now feel it

in such a great way that it touches my heart.” Unlike other audiences when the Pope would take a short route to his place on the podium, this day the Pope-mobile crisscrossed the Square so that all those attending might have an opportunity to express their heartfelt gratitude for the years of service of their wise and humble pastor.The universality of the Church was on display as he made his way one last time to address his flock ---- every continent was present reflected as well in the faces of the College of Cardinals gathered sooner than they ever expected to elect another man to fill the Petrine ministry.



In his homily, an unusually personal message, Benedict cited the biblical voyage of Jesus and the apostles on the Sea of Galilee, saying God had given him “so many days of sun and light breezes, when the fishing was abundant. But there were times when the waters were choppy and there were headwinds, as throughout the history of the church, and it looked as if the Lord was sleeping. But I have always known that the Lord was in that boat, that the boat was not mine or ours, but was his and he will not let it founder.” Thus he made reference to some of the situations in the Church that brought to the decision to step down from his responsibilities aware that his powers had diminished, to use his own words, and that he did not feel capable of governing the Church adequately. He said that it was a decision that he made with a deep sense of peace. He added, "Loving the church also means having the courage to make tough choices, bearing always in mind the good of the church and not of oneself.”