

Pope Francis welcomes Benedict XVI back to the Vatican

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI returned to the Vatican on Thursday (May 2), where he will live a few hundred meters from his successor, Pope Francis, in an arrangement that has no precedent in the history of the Catholic Church.

Benedict, 86, flew by helicopter from the papal summer residence of Castel Gandolfo, where he spent the past two months since his resignation on Feb. 28.

All the Vatican's top officials, including Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, showed up at the Vatican's helipad to welcome Benedict, while Francis chose to meet the the former pope in front of the Mater Ecclesiae convent where Benedict will live out his retirement.

Francis greeted his predecessor "with great and fraternal cordiality," according to a Vatican statement, before the two men stopped briefly in the convent chapel to pray.

Benedict was accompanied by his personal secretary, Archbishop Georg Gaenswein, who is also serving Francis as prefect of the papal household, charged with setting the new pope's schedule and arranging his audiences.

According to the Vatican's statement, the former pope is "happy to be back in the Vatican, where he intends to dedicate himself ... to the service of the church primarily through prayer."

Benedict's return was a low-profile event; Vatican TV didn't cover it and the Vatican's semiofficial newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, didn't mention the former

pope's return in its afternoon editions.

While some church observers worry that Benedict's presence could overshadow Francis and his course of reforms, John Thavis, a former Rome bureau chief for Catholic News Service and a frequent Vatican commentator, said the side-by-side popes shouldn't cause a "crisis in the church."

Thavis wrote in his blog that Benedict understands that "even an offhand remark by the retired pope ... could echo within the hierarchy or across the blogosphere, and possibly be construed as criticism or divergence from the current pope."

Before resigning, Benedict said he would "withdraw into prayer" and live his final years "hidden from the world." He also pledged his "unconditional reverence and obedience" to his successor.

According to Rebecca Rist, a specialist in church history at the University of Reading in Britain, the two popes will have a "very cordial" relationship, unlike the 13th-century scuffles between Celestine V and his successor Boniface VIII.

Boniface persuaded Celestine that it was "in the best interests of the Vatican for him to resign," Rist said. But Boniface, "fearing that enduring loyalties to the former pontiff could provoke a schism," ordered Celestine imprisoned until his death.

In the small Mater Ecclesiae convent inside the Vatican walls, Benedict will be assisted by Gaenswein and four members of Memores Domini, the conservative lay group that staffed his apartment during his pontificate.

During the past two months, the convent was renovated to suit the needs of the former pope. His residence will include a guest room for his older brother Georg Ratzinger, who is also a priest.