

# At ground zero, pope offers silent prayer, comforts survivors

NEW YORK – In the most somber moment of his six-day visit to the United States, Pope Benedict XVI knelt alone at ground zero and offered a silent prayer.

The cheering crowds were far away as the pope blessed the ground where the World Trade Center stood until terrorists forced planes into its twin towers Sept. 11, 2001.

While the extraordinary security measures that surrounded the pope's entire visit tangibly demonstrated how the attacks changed the United States, the ground zero visit gave the pope an opportunity to speak to and console those whose lives were changed most directly that Sept. 11.

Twenty-four people stood around a candle, a plot of earth and a tiny pond as the pope knelt in prayer; they were the survivors, the family members of the dead and representatives of the New York Port Authority, police and fire departments – the first responders.

At the bottom of the 70-foot crater where the towers stood, surrounded by steel construction rods, forklifts and steel beams, Pope Benedict did not read a speech.

Instead, looking up past the skyscrapers shrouded in fog, he read a prayer.

"O God of love, compassion and healing," he prayed, "look on us, people of many different faiths and traditions, who gather here today at this site, the scene of incredible violence and pain."

He asked God to grant "eternal light and peace" to all who died at the site as well as at the Pentagon and in Shanksville, Pa., the same day.

Pope Benedict also prayed to the "God of peace," asking him to bring his peace "to our violent world: peace in the hearts of all men and women and peace among the nations of the earth."

He prayed for all those whose lives were caught up in the horror that ground zero

symbolizes: “Turn to your way of love those whose hearts and minds are consumed with hatred.”

Although the attacks occurred more than six years ago, the pope’s prayer acknowledged that many people are still trying to understand and deal with what happened.

“God of understanding, overwhelmed by the magnitude of this tragedy, we seek your light and guidance as we confront such terrible events,” he prayed. “Grant that those whose lives were spared may live so that the lives lost here may not have been lost in vain.

“Comfort and console us, strengthen us in hope, and give us the wisdom and courage to work tirelessly for a world where true peace and love reign among nations and in the hearts of all,” he concluded.

Cardinal Edward M. Egan, who walked with the pope down the concrete ramp leading to the bottom of the crater, stood alongside Pope Benedict and introduced him to the 24 officers, survivors and family members, most of whom kissed the pope’s ring.

Although the pope spent only half an hour at the site, he listened to each person and had a word of comfort for each of them. When he blessed the ground with holy water – turning toward each direction of the compass – he hallowed the only place some of them know as their loved ones’ burial ground.

The principal cellist of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra accompanied the ceremony with a low, soothing yet mournful melody.

The small group gathered at the site also included New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, New York Gov. David A. Paterson and New Jersey Gov. John Corzine.

After the pope left, most of those who had met with him took turns kneeling in prayer on the very spot where the pope had knelt. Some greeted each other with hugs and a few tears; one woman squeezed the hand of a New York City police officer.

Contributing to this story was John Thavis.