

Pacing the pope: Pope's seclusion is prudence, not disappearing act

VATICAN CITY – Every pontificate has its rhythm, and sometimes Pope Benedict XVI's seems to have more than one.

In recent weeks, journalists have seen the 81-year-old pontiff go from seven-hour days on the public stage to virtual seclusion behind the Vatican walls.

Predictably, that led to one alarming report – promptly denied by the Vatican – about the pope's supposedly “fragile heart.”

In fact, what may appear from the outside as warning signs probably reflect a more subtle process: pacing the pope.

In the week leading up to Pope Benedict's six-day visit to the United States, his activities were reduced to a minimum. He gave no speeches, met with no groups and only a few individuals, and limited his public appearances to a weekly general audience and a Sunday blessing.

In Washington and New York, the pope sailed through a busy schedule – 16 major events – with no evident problems, a fact that pleased his aides immensely. But once he got back to Rome, he took another rest and held no public audiences for a week.

Some might call it a disappearing act. Vatican officials would simply call it prudence.

“They're being careful, but I don't think it's because of any particular health concern,” said one Vatican official who has known the pope for years.

If the pope's doctors had serious worries about his health, they simply wouldn't let him travel or would at least prohibit long intercontinental voyages, he said.

In early May, the Vatican confirmed that the pope would fly to Australia for a World Youth Day celebration in July. That seemed to suggest a clean bill of papal health.

But the announcement fueled speculation when it was disclosed that after landing in

Australia the pope would spend three days doing absolutely nothing in order to get over jet lag.

Once again, pacing took precedence over public image: Pope Benedict didn't have to hit the ground running.

"There's no mystery. It's just logical for the pope to rest after such a long flight," said the Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi.

One papal aide emphasized that the pope's careful pacing applies not only to foreign trips but also to his schedule all year long.

"If you look closely at the pope's agenda, you'll see that there's a systematic effort to avoid periods of excessively intense activity," he said.

"As soon as he was elected, he made it clear that his activity would not be frenetic like that of (Pope) John Paul II. He sets priorities," he said.

Last March, the pope cut back his schedule ahead of heavy Easter activities later in the month. The lull coincided with a visit by the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, to Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the cardinal's myriad speeches and sermons were distributed by the Vatican press office. There is no "vice pope," but for several days Cardinal Bertone sure seemed like one.

Although Pope Benedict predicted that his would not be a long pontificate, he has shown no lack of stamina during his first three years. Many visitors to the Vatican, including those who come for his weekly general audience, remark on how good he looks and sounds.

He chooses his moments, however. In early May, for example, instead of celebrating Mass for 150,000 Italian members of Catholic Action in St. Peter's Square, he came down afterward for a ride-through and a speech.

As he settled back into his work rhythm two weeks after his return from the United States, he had plenty on his plate: meetings with the Anglican primate and the Armenian Apostolic patriarch, speeches to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and several other organizations, a crosstown visit to pray the rosary in a Rome

basilica, hosting a concert by a Chinese orchestra, ordaining new priests, celebrating a Pentecost liturgy, meeting with Hungarian bishops and preparing for a two-day pastoral visit to northern Italy.

Once again, the pace was picking up.