

Pope celebrates low-key birthday with brother at papal villa

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI celebrated a low-key birthday with his brother at the papal villa in Castel Gandolfo.

The pope, who turned 82 April 16, had a very informal “family celebration” that included a visit by a small group of top Vatican officials, the Vatican’s spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, told reporters.

The officials, including the secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, visited the pope in the morning to offer their birthday wishes.

The pope then had a private lunch with his brother, Monsignor Georg Ratzinger, who turned 85 early this year, Father Lombardi said.

The Vatican spokesman said the pope received from government and church leaders worldwide many letters wishing him a happy birthday and “even some sweets.”

Italian President Giorgio Napolitano, who sent a special written message for the pope’s birthday and the fourth anniversary of his election as pope April 19, thanked Pope Benedict for his support of those hit by the April 6 earthquake in central Italy.

The president thanked him for his words and gestures, which he said “comforted the whole nation and encouraged us to deeply embrace the message of hope that comes with the celebration of Easter.”

Father Lombardi said the German band that had been in St. Peter’s Square during the pope’s weekly general audience April 15 had gone out to Castel Gandolfo where the pope was staying.

He said band members played “a small concert” of two musical interludes in the courtyard of the papal villa for the pope on the eve of his birthday.

During the general audience at the Vatican, pilgrims had broken into a spontaneous rendition of “Happy birthday, dear Benedict” followed by an encore with musical

accompaniment by the German band, whose members wore traditional German costumes.

Smaller groups of pilgrims also sang birthday greetings in their native languages at different moments during the audience.