

Pope visits place of Jesus' birth, Bethlehem children's hospital

BETHLEHEM, West Bank – Pope Benedict XVI knelt in prayer at the spot where tradition holds Jesus was born, then went to a Catholic children's hospital, where he held an infant boy named Elias in his arms.

The pope and his entourage visited the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem May 13, kneeling to pray in the grotto where a star marks the place of Jesus' birth, then kneeling at the spot revered as the place where he was laid in a manger.

After the brief visit to the church, Pope Benedict went to the Caritas Children's Hospital, a facility with 80 beds for seriously ill children and a clinic serving thousands of Christian and Muslim children each year.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, said the pope spent 15 minutes being shown around the various wards of the hospital.

Elias, the baby the pope held, was born prematurely and now weighs about 5.5 pounds, Father Lombardi said.

The hospital, funded by German and Swiss Catholics, was established with the conviction that "innocent children deserve a safe haven from all that can harm them in times and places of conflict," the pope said in a brief speech to hospital staff members and donors.

The facility, he said, is "a quiet oasis for the most vulnerable and has shone as a beacon of hope that love can prevail over hatred and peace over violence."

Father Lombardi said that Pope Benedict donated to the hospital a respirator for premature babies.