

U.S. bishops give pope check for \$870,000

WASHINGTON - U.S. bishops presented Pope Benedict XVI with a birthday gift from Catholics across the country - a check for \$870,000 to support his charitable works.

At the end of a vespers service at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told the pope the bishops were privileged to be sharing his 81st birthday with him. He presented him with the check without specifying how the money had been collected.

Earlier, in the shrine's upper church, employees of the USCCB and the Archdiocese of Washington sang "Happy Birthday," as did members of the crowd outside the shrine.

The pope's 81st birthday, celebrated on his first full day in the United States, included multiple renditions of "Happy Birthday" - in English, German and Spanish.

At the White House, at the papal nunciature, everywhere the pope went, the crowd sent along birthday greetings.

At 5:21 a.m., the disc jockey on a country music radio station in Fredericksburg, Va. - 50 miles south of Washington - invited listeners to join her in singing "Happy Birthday" to the pope.

On the South Lawn of the White House, dignitaries, bishops and guests joined in an impromptu rendition of the song. Later, opera star Kathleen Battle led the song again, and the pope blew out candles on a four-tier cake.

Gianluca Biccini, who is traveling with the papal entourage, told the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, that Pope Benedict "began the second day of his apostolic visit at an early hour with a Mass celebrated in the small chapel of the apostolic nunciature," where he was staying in Washington.

The paper described the Mass as being a “family” celebration with the pope’s closest aides as well as “about 30 members of the nunciature staff accompanied by their families.”

Later that morning, the pope was greeted by Catholic school students in a private ceremony at the embassy before the official start of his April 15-20 pastoral visit to the U.S.

A choir from Annunciation School in Washington greeted the Bavarian-born pope, singing “Happy Birthday” in German and English. Pope Benedict shook the hands of several students and congratulated the school’s music teacher on the students’ singing performance. He said it was “wonderful. In German and in English.”

After the pope attended the White House ceremony in the morning, he returned to the nunciature for a birthday luncheon with U.S. cardinals, officers of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the papal entourage.

Later that afternoon, in a private ceremony at the nunciature, the pope received birthday gifts from Catholic school students.

The gifts reflected what the pope’s private secretary, Monsignor Georg Ganswein, requested on behalf of the pontiff last year for his 80th birthday. At the time, the papal secretary said the pope did not want to accept personal gifts from the faithful and suggested that those who wanted to give something could make an offering that the pope could use for special church or humanitarian causes.

Kristina Wilson, a junior at St. John’s College High School in Washington, gave the pope a birthday card on behalf of the National Catholic Educational Association. The group collected pledges of 1.7 million hours of community service. Stephanie Joy Heredia, an eighth-grade student at Corpus Christi School in Falls Church, Va., gave the pontiff a gift-wrapped box that contained the names of all parishes and schools participating in the “Birthday Blessing for Pope Benedict” effort.

Jennifer Sharkey, an eighth-grader at St. Jane Frances de Chantal School in Bethesda, Md., gave the pope a birthday card with partial results of the “From Hunger to Hope” food drive conducted the weekend of April 12-13 by parishes in the

Archdiocese of Washington. The card read 200,000 pounds of food; the latest tally, according to Maryland Catholic Conference official Mary Schneidau, was close to 230,000 pounds. Sharkey also gave the pontiff a happy-birthday sticker on behalf of her school.

Although the pope was not able to attend a White House dinner held in his honor because he was meeting with U.S. bishops, the White House kitchen served Bavarian-style food - such as ramp spatzle and potato dumplings - to a guest list that included Catholic leaders in Washington specifically for the pope's visit.

Across the city at the Italian Embassy, Placido Domingo performed in the pope's honor.

The birthday bash was not to end there. In New York, Catholics planned to continue to commemorate the pope's birthday. Participants at an April 19 youth rally at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers planned a chorus of "Happy Birthday" in German for the pontiff.

Birthday greetings to the pope from international leaders included a message from England's Queen Elizabeth II, who said, "I have much pleasure in sending my warmest felicitations to Your Holiness, along with my prayers and best wishes for a serene and peaceful future."

Birthday wishes also came from the faithful waiting along Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington for the popemobile to pass.

Jim Shafranski, 76, of Stevens Point, Wis., shares the same birthday as Pope Benedict. He said he never thought he'd be able to see the pope and share their birthday together. Shafranski has sent birthday cards to Pope Benedict every year since he became pope and received an acknowledgment from the papal nuncio.

Contributing to this story were Angelo Stagnaro in New York, Cindy Wooden at the Vatican and Laura Jamison in Washington.