

Pope will shorten his Christmas Eve schedule

Midnight Mass will be celebrated at 10 p.m. to help ease Benedict's holiday season fatigue.

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Pope Benedict XVI will break with tradition this year and celebrate Christmas Eve Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at 10 p.m. instead of midnight, the Vatican said Monday.

Papal spokesman Father Federico Lombardi said the decision to change the schedule was made two months ago to "ease the [pope's] fatigue at a time when there are many ceremonies and commitments" during Christmastime.

"There's no cause for worry about the health" of the 82-year-old Benedict, Lombardi said. Vatican aides decided to conserve his strength and the pontiff agreed, the spokesman added.

On noon Christmas Day, Benedict will read a traditional holiday message from the central balcony of the basilica as crowds gather in the square. The message, known as "Urbi et Orbi" (To the City and to the World), usually contemplates the religious significance of Christmas and reflects on wars, disasters and other world events.

Benedict's predecessor, John Paul II, celebrated Christmas Eve Mass at midnight in the basilica and then led a midmorning Mass for the faithful on Christmas Day at the start of his papacy in 1978. But as he aged and began suffering from Parkinson's disease, John Paul dropped the Dec. 25 Mass for the public while keeping to the "Urbi et Orbi" tradition and giving holiday greetings in dozens of languages.

Benedict will make his first main holiday appearance Tuesday in central Rome when he goes to the Spanish Steps to pray before a towering statue of the Virgin Mary on the Catholic feast day of the Immaculate Conception.

The pontiff will mark the year's end with a solemn vespers service of thanksgiving at 6 p.m. on Dec. 31 in the basilica. On New Year's Day, the pope will return to the basilica to celebrate Mass at 10 a.m.

Benedict will lead a Mass at the same hour in St. Peter's on Jan. 6, the feast day of the Epiphany.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nation-and-world/la-fg-vatican-christmas8-2009dec08,0,1316630,print.story>