

Pope Benedict XVI begins marathon Scripture reading

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ROME — In the beginning Pope Benedict XVI read these words: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth."

And the pope and millions of viewers watching him on Italian television Sunday night saw that it was good.

The pontiff launched a marathon reading of the Bible, from Genesis to Apocalypse, broadcast live on state television. It will last seven days and six nights. The roster of about 1,300 readers features former Italian presidents, current Cabinet ministers, soccer stars, foreign diplomats, cardinals, intellectuals, actors and opera singers as well as ordinary citizens.

The Vatican invited a multi-faith, multiethnic cross section of participants to the event in the Holy Cross in Jerusalem Basilica here. They include Orthodox clergymen; an Algerian female writer and five other Muslims; and the Israeli ambassador to the Vatican, along with a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp and 14 other Jewish readers.

Organizers wanted to make it clear, the Vatican said in a statement, that "the Bible belongs to everyone without any discrimination or cultural or ideological barrier." The message was underscored by the pope's decision to take part, as the pontiff explained in comments to the faithful after Sunday Mass at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

"In this way the word of God can enter homes to accompany lives of families and individuals," Benedict said. "A seed that if well received will not fail to bring abundant fruits."

Although the pope tends to have a quiet, reserved style, he liked the idea of making the Bible accessible, Vatican officials said. Moreover, the timing was good because Sunday marked the start of the bishops synod, an assembly of bishops from around the world.

"The reason the pope has agreed is to give his support to a program intended to bring the listening and reading of the Bible to a wider public of every age and condition," said Father Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican press office, in an interview. "The church encourages the faithful to read and understand the Holy Scriptures. . . . The pope, therefore, intends to give a personal example . . . at a moment when the entire Catholic Church is reflecting and praying on the centrality of the Holy Scriptures in its life."

The pope chose not to attend in person for security reasons and to avoid being a distraction, organizers said. Dressed in white vestments, Benedict opened the 139 nonstop hours of the "Bible Day and Night" program in a live video link broadcast to the audience in the basilica from the Apostolic Palace.

The 81-year-old pontiff seemed a bit subdued, looking at the camera only briefly toward the end of his reading. He was followed by Russian Orthodox Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, representative of the Moscow Patriarchate to the European Union in Brussels, and Domenico Maselli, an Italian Protestant leader.

The first segment ended with Roberto Benigni, the manic, frizzy-haired actor-director who won two Oscars for "Life is Beautiful" and is Italy's most beloved comic. Departing from the previously solemn tone of the evening, Benigni gave a cheerful, spirited performance that drew the first applause of the night. Andrea Bocelli, a noted tenor, sang between readings.

Despite the inclusive rhetoric of the organizers, not everyone they invited took part. Riccardo Di Segni, the chief rabbi of Rome, told the Italian media that he had declined because he felt the event was "too Catholic," although he respected the initiative.

Nonetheless, Di Segni will be the first rabbi to take part in the synod that began Sunday.

The first five books of the Old Testament are the Torah, the Jewish holy book. Muslims regard the Bible as a precursor to the Koran, their holy book.

The marathon will end Saturday with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the secretary of State of the Vatican, reading the 22nd chapter of the Book of Revelation.

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