

Vatican dismisses Pope health rumours

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Pope Benedict XVI prays during the Immaculate Conception celebration prayer in Spain's Square in central Rome on December 8, 2009. A Vatican spokesman said Tuesday the pontiff was in good health, dismissing rumours that surfaced after the traditional Christmas midnight mass was brought forward. **Photograph by:** Tony Gentile, Reuters

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI's spokesman said Tuesday the pontiff was in good health, dismissing rumours that surfaced after the traditional Christmas midnight mass was brought forward.

Father Federico Lombardi told AFP he was "astonished" that rumours the pope had health problems had begun in recent days when his Christmas diary has been public for some time.

The pope, who is 82, will celebrate mass at 10 p.m. on Christmas Eve — the first time he has brought the service forward.

The last pope, John Paul II, celebrated midnight mass at the usual time until 2004, the last Christmas before his death.

Lombardi said the earlier mass, which will finish shortly after midnight instead of at 2 a.m., was planned "to make Christmas a little less tiring for the pope, who has many engagements during this time".

"It is a sensible precaution (and) there is no cause for concern or alarm," Lombardi insisted.

"Everyone can see the pope is well: he is following the same calendar as in recent years, with public audiences on Wednesdays and angelus services on Sundays."

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