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Improved Pope meets with Italian pilgrims

Pope John Paul II appeared in good shape at an audience with Italian pilgrims yesterday, a day after skipping an afternoon Mass to rest after a hectic week.

A crowd of several thousand cheered enthusiastically as the pope was wheeled into an audience hall on the rolling throne he uses to get around in public.

The Holy Father read a speech celebrating the birth of an Italian saint, speaking in a comparatively clear and strong voice.

"Dearest brothers and sisters," Pope John Paul said, again sparking applause. "I am please to offer my cordial welcome to all of you, gathered in Rome for the solemn celebration of the fourth centenary of the birth of St Joseph of Copertino."

After reading the introductory passage, the pope had a Vatican priest take over the speech, as he has often done recently. The pope has been handing over more of his ceremonial duties because of difficulties in speaking.

The Vatican dropped an afternoon Mass from the pope's schedule Friday to "lighten his schedule after such a busy week," said the pope's spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Valls.

SOURCE

Frail pope appears to improve, meeting with Italian pilgrims (Associated Press/Baltimore Sun)

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