

**Pope says Swiss Guard is still
an invaluable asset after 500 years**

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By Carol Glatz (Catholic News Service)

VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- Half a millennium since it was founded by Pope Julius II, the Swiss Guard, whose members pledge to risk their lives for the safety of the pope, is still an invaluable asset to the Vatican, Pope Benedict XVI said as he blessed a contingent of former guards who took part in a 439-mile trek from Switzerland to Rome.

After walking for nearly a month, some 70 former guardsmen arrived in St. Peter's Square May 4 to receive the pope's blessing and pay tribute to the first 150 Swiss soldiers who came to Rome at the request of Pope Julius.

Speaking from the window of his apartment, Pope Benedict praised the guards gathered in St. Peter's Square, saying their re-enactment of the arrival of the first Swiss Guards 500 years ago was "a beautiful initiative."

He said their march from Bellinzona, Switzerland, through the Italian cities of Milan, Siena and Acquapendente to St. Peter's Square "recalls the courage of the 150 Swiss citizens who, with valiant generosity, defended unto death the sovereign pontiff, writing an important page in the history of the church with their sacrifice."

The pope was referring to the guards who died saving Pope Clement VII's life during the sack of Rome May 6, 1527. On this anniversary each year, the Vatican holds swears in new guards to help remind them of the seriousness of their commitment.

In his blessing May 4, the pope gave thanks to God for all the hard work and "good carried out by your predecessors and for the priceless contribution the papal Swiss Guard continues to offer the Holy See today."

Pope Benedict also presided over a special Mass May 6 in St. Peter's Basilica to mark the Guard's anniversary. In his homily, he said every pope after Pope Julius has always reaffirmed the need to maintain the special soldiers.

When Pope Paul VI "dissolved all the other military corps of the Vatican" in 1970, the Swiss Guard was spared, he said.

To be a member of the Swiss Guard "means to adhere to Christ and the church without reservations, ready to give (one's) life for this," he said.

While offering the current soldiers and veterans a "well-deserved and cordial thanks," Pope Benedict also invited them to look to the future "with courage and faithfulness."

Later that same day in St. Peter's Square, 33 new recruits for the Swiss Guard were sworn in during a colorful ceremony attended by their families and friends as well as former guards and Vatican officials.

One by one, each new recruit took an oath to "faithfully, loyally and honorably" serve the pope with all his strength and to sacrifice his life, if necessary, to defend the pontiff.

To help honor the world's oldest army, the pikemen and musketeers of the Honorable Artillery Company of London and the **Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts** -- respectively, the second- and third-oldest military corps in the world -- took part in the event.

They, along with a historic corps from Madrid, Spain, and another from the Swiss canton of Fribourg, marched across St. Peter's Square before and after the swearing-in ceremony; many of them were wearing historic uniforms and bearing antique weaponry or playing the fife and drums.

Brig. Gen. Joseph Milano of the Boston-based historic artillery company, told Catholic News Service it was "a great honor" to have been invited to attend the May 6 ceremony by the Swiss Guard commander, Col. Elmar Mader. Milano was one of 250 men from the Massachusetts' artillery corps in attendance.

Local city officials took part in May 4 celebrations that re-enacted the arrival of the first contingent of Swiss soldiers in Rome.

Two groups of former guards -- one regiment dressed in their ceremonial red, gold and blue uniforms, and the other in hiking gear with matching red and white sport shirts -- entered Rome's ancient city walls by passing under the 16th-century gate of Porta del Popolo in the north of the city.

The marchers waved and snapped photos as an Italian military band played and the crowds cheered and shouted "bravi," meaning "good job."

A squadron of current Swiss Guard members then led the former guards through Rome's downtown streets to St. Peter's Square to receive their papal blessing and be reunited with family members.

Also completing the 27-day pilgrimage was a 10-foot wild linden tree sapling which had accompanied the marchers on a pick-up truck. The Italian forestry service, which donated the tree to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the corps, drove the tree alongside the marchers every day. The tree, whose foliage had thinned considerably after its long, bumpy ride, was to be planted in the Vatican Gardens.

Seven days of Swiss Guard jubilee celebrations in Rome included several concerts, a homecoming reunion of former guards, an open house of the soldiers' barracks inside the Vatican, and evening fireworks over the Tiber River near Castel Sant'Angelo.