

# THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF POPE BENEDICT XVI

This article will outline the life of Pope Benedict XVI (born Joseph Ratzinger) up to his election as Pope and some of his teachings in his reign as the vicar of Christ.

## I. EARLY LIFE AND PRIESTHOOD THROUGH THE VATICAN II COUNCIL

Joseph Ratzinger was born on Holy Saturday, April 16, 1927, to a middle class family in Bavaria, Germany and was the first child in his parish to be baptized with the holy water blessed for that Easter. His parents were very devout Catholics, with his father working as a constable. As he described it in the book length interview entitled Salt of the Earth, his father was clear-headed and rational, his mother very warm and both his parents, although of modest means, very cultured, trying to get him the best education they could. After the Nazis came to power in 1934, his father opposed their policies and, as a result, was forced to take a lower paying position, finally leaving the civil service in 1937.

Young Joseph was interested in becoming a priest from an early age and entered minor seminary in 1939. In August of 1943, he was involuntarily drafted into the German army and served in the antiaircraft artillery until September of 1944, while still attending classes at a local school. In 1944, he was assigned to work at the eastern front and then to the infantry. At the war's end, he was briefly taken as a prisoner of war for six weeks and then returned home. In November of 1945 he and his older brother Georg reentered seminary, resuming once again studies for the priesthood. They were both ordained priests for the Diocese of Munich on June 29, 1951, the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul. Now Fr. Ratzinger worked for a year at a local parish, where his busy schedule included teaching religious education for 16 hours a week, as well as numerous funerals and baptisms. He was then sent to obtain a doctoral degree in theology from the University of Munich, with his dissertation in the ecclesiology (theology of the church) of St. Augustine. He began teaching university classes as he worked on his second doctoral thesis, on the theology of history as understood by the great Franciscan theologian St. Bonaventure. Fr. Ratzinger obtained a full professorship at the University of Bonn in 1959 and continued teaching as a professor until 1977. He was a very popular teacher with many of his classes over-enrolled. According to one of his students, he "put things in a new light and brought a new approach to them." One of his fellow professors, Wolfgang Beinert said that his language had a "classical radiance."

When Blessed Pope John XXIII inaugurated the Vatican II Council, the Archbishop of Cologne, Cardinal Josef Frings, asked Fr. Ratzinger to be his peritus, or expert, at the Council. In that capacity, Fr. Ratzinger helped Cardinal Frings write a famous speech in

which he, joining his friend Cardinal Achille Leinart, argued that the Council should not simply vote on documents prepared by a few handpicked committees, but rather discuss the proposals anew and come to a common agreement that involved the ideas of the broad range of bishops and other theologians. That view prevailed and the Council would meet for another three years, hammering out its famous sixteen documents to present the timeless faith in the modern world. Fr. Ratzinger, while still teaching at the University of Bonn and then the University of Muenster, attended all four sessions of the Council from 1962-65. And, by the end of the Council, Fr. Ratzinger's reputation as a first class theologian was established.

## II. FROM THE VATICAN II COUNCIL TO THE VATICAN

After the Vatican II Council, Fr. Ratzinger continued to teach at the Universities of Tübingen and Münster in Germany and was considered something of a progressive, for he tried to express theology in new and engaging terms and fully supported new governance structures that involved more consultation and involvement of the laity, as well a greater willingness to engage secular culture. However, as the 1960s continued many theologians went too far. Instead of explaining the one faith in fresh terms, they departed from the teachings of the Church and felt free to call themselves Catholic, while failing in fidelity to the Church's teachings, liturgy and governance. Fr. Ratzinger knew the Council well and understood that this dissident approach was contrary to the faith and contrary to what the Council called for. See, e.g., Vatican II Council, Sacrosanctum Concilium, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1963) 22; Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (1965) 21-29.

In Germany as well as America, the situation came to a crisis in 1967-69, when dissent broke out among seemingly Catholic theologians, who denounced the teachings of the Church, the ancient forms of liturgy, and even the Bible, as outdated. Fr. Ratzinger tried calmly to explain that the Council had not broken from anything said before, but rather tried to build upon it, and that the ancient faith will guide us to God now as ever. He thus became called a "conservative," although he would really identify himself simply as faithful to the traditions and teachings of the Church, in the true spirit of the Vatican II Council. Because of a radical and even Marxist takeover at many universities, including the University of Tübingen, he moved back to Bavaria and began his most beloved teaching position at the University of Regensburg. There, he continued advancing in his academic and teaching work and published his famous book Introduction to Christianity in 1968. In 1972, he and other leading scholars, such as the Swiss, French and German theologians Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac and Walter Kasper, founded the quarterly journal Communio. For the next 33 years he continued writing for Communio, which is perhaps the leading theological journal in the world to this day.

Pope Paul VI took note of his teaching and writing abilities and, on March 25, 1977, appointed Fr. Ratzinger as the Archbishop of

Munich and Friesburg. Fr. Ratzinger was doubtful about whether to accept the appointment, for as he said later, "I had little pastoral experience. I was called from the beginning to teach." But advisors pointed out to him that the problems the Church faced were rooted in bad theology and that it would take theologian bishops to lead the way out. And so he became an archbishop, taking the motto, "Co-workers of the truth." As the archbishop of this prominent archdiocese, he was soon appointed a cardinal, and was the youngest member of the 1978 conclaves that elected John Paul I and then John Paul II as pope.

He and John Paul II had written to each other since 1974, and got along very well from the time they first met at the conclaves. Shortly after his election, the new Pope made it clear that he intended to bring Cardinal Ratzinger to Rome; and, in 1981 he appointed Cardinal Ratzinger as the Prefect of the Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith, which is charged with defending and explaining true Catholic doctrine. That position has become central in an age of theological confusion, and Cardinal Ratzinger would become Pope John Paul II's closest advisor.

### III. PREFECT AND POPE

As prefect of the Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger was charged with maintaining the truth and purity of the faith; and that meant, among other things, investigating claims that some theologians had strayed from the truth and trying to bring them back. In that capacity, Cardinal Ratzinger resolved most claims quietly, either by acquitting the theologians or by getting them to revise their teachings. Unfortunately, a few theologians, such as the Brazilian Franciscan Leonardo Boff and the American priest Charles Curran, who taught at Catholic University in Washington, continuously taught dissenting views as Catholic. Fr. Boff denounced the entire notion of the church hierarchy and Fr. Curran claimed that the Church's timeless teachings on family and sexual ethics were not actually binding. Because neither of them would recant these views, which were contrary to what the Church has always taught, Cardinal Ratzinger suspended their right to teach religion at Catholic universities or present their views as Catholic until those views changed. Even then, he did not remove them from the priesthood or ministry, although Fr. Boff would on his own leave the Church.

Cardinal Ratzinger was always careful to distinguish disagreements with a theologian from claims that the theologian was contradicting the faith; and he maintained an active dialogue with many scholars despite their disagreements. For example, in his recent book *Jesus of Nazareth Part I*, he cautions about the over-use of the historical critical method of Scriptural interpretation (which tends to re-read the Bible in the light of recent historical, linguical and archeological discoveries.) But as Prefect he spoke very highly of the American scholar Fr. Raymond Brown, who was a leading proponent of this method, saying at one point "would be very happy if we had many

exegetes like Father Brown."

In addition, as Prefect, Cardinal Ratzinger was able to explain the faith more deeply to the modern world. Thus, when Pope John Paul II agreed with the 1985 International Synod of Bishops that the Church should publish the first universal catechism in 400 years to update her explanation of the faith, he placed Cardinal Ratzinger in charge of the commission to write it. The initial draft of the Catechism was finished in 1992, with revisions completed in 1997; and its sales exceeded all expectations, with 2.3 million English copies sold in 1994 alone. In addition to his official and informal writing and speaking, Cardinal Ratzinger also gave book-length interviews, such as the famed 1985 Ratzinger Report on the state of the Church and the 1996 book Salt of the Earth on his life, work and theological perspectives. In the latter case, the interviewer was so impressed that he returned to the Church.

During Pope John Paul II's last years, Cardinal Ratzinger was continuously with him, becoming in 2002 the dean, or leader, of the College of Cardinals. When Pope John Paul II died, Cardinal Ratzinger ran the funeral ceremonies and arranged for the conclave that would elect his successor. Although 78 years old, he was still in top form and very much in charge of the situation. At the beginning of the conclave, he gave a famous address in which he warned against the "dictatorship of relativism" that was suppressing the desire for truth in the modern world. When the conclave was gathering in the Vatican, Cardinal Ratzinger quickly became the favorite and obtained the required two thirds majority by the fourth ballot, which occurred on the second day of the conclave. Thus, he was elected Pope, taking the name Benedict XVI in honor of both St. Benedict, the sixth century liturgical reformer and founder of the religious order and spirituality that bears his name, and Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922), the heroic advocate of peace and defender of the poor and refugees.

#### IV. LITURGICAL RENEWAL AND TEACHING

Many of the accomplishments of Pope Benedict XVI reflect the influence of the two great figures from whom he took his papal name. First, there was St. Benedict of Nursia, who established the Benedictine order that would, through careful liturgy, patient prayer, spiritual reading, and humble work become the backbone of the European civilization that was rising after the fall of the Roman Empire. Second, there was Pope Benedict XV who heroically and unsuccessfully tried to prevent the empires of the time from plunging their nations into what would become World War I, but who heroically and successfully organized the relief of millions of refugees during and after that conflagration. Like St. Benedict and Pope Benedict XV, the current Holy Father is often considered too much focused on "impractical" otherworldly principles to have much real influence; and like them, his teachings and influence are likely to continue long after the powers of the world that focus on seemingly more tangible gains have long since vanished.

Pope Benedict has made it clear from the beginning that he will rely on the glory of God, rather than human glory to guide the Church. Thus, he began his papacy by dispensing with the usual public submission given by each of the cardinals to the new pope. Instead, he had twelve people, including three cardinals, a bishop, a priest, a deacon, a consecrated religious sister, a recently married couple and their baby, and two recently confirmed young people, greet him on behalf of all of the people of God. The point was to emphasize the universal call to holiness, a repeated theme of the Vatican II Council and of Pope John Paul II. He also showed a reverence for his predecessor by opening the cause for the canonization of Pope John Paul II within a month after his election, waiving the usually five year waiting period, as Pope Paul VI had done for his predecessors, Popes Pius XII and John XXIII.

## A. Liturgy

In guiding the Church, Pope Benedict has tried to emphasize a renewal of the world through a reverent liturgy, as St. Benedict did long ago. Thus, in 2007, he appointed Msgr. Guido Marini as his Master of Ceremonies to make Vatican liturgies fine examples of very reverent, dignified works of God. As Msgr. Marini explained in a famous speech on January 6, 2009 "everything in the liturgical act, through the nobility, the beauty, and the harmony of the exterior sign, must be conducive to adoration, to union with God." Also in 2007, Pope Benedict permitted the universal use of the pre-Vatican form of the Mass, often called the Trinitine rite Mass. As he explained, there is no attempt to downplay the legitimate reforms inaugurated by the Vatican II Council, but rather a recognition that the older form of the Mass helps many people and should be preserved. As he said in explaining the permission, "the history of the liturgy there is growth and progress, but no rupture. What earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too." On April 28, 2010, the Vatican approved the new English translation of the Mass and gave it to the Pope for his confirmation, which came into effect in America on November 27, 2011. This translation does not alter any action of the Mass, but rather preserves in translation the sacred, majestic tone of the original Latin, fitted for the principle then Cardinal Ratzinger wrote in The Spirit of the Liturgy, namely that "liturgy . . . is God's descent upon the world, the source of real liberation." The Pope has emphasized prayer and liturgy as one necessary source of freedom and true peace, and the truth about God and man as another necessary source.

## B. Teachings

At the Last Supper, Jesus promised the Apostles that the Holy Spirit would "teach [them] everything", "remind them of all the He taught them," and "guide them to all truth." John 14:25, 16:13. Likewise, before ascending into heaven, Jesus instructed His apostles to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things [He] commanded them." Matt 28:19-20. The Apostles would take up their mission and, led by St. Peter, teach the truth in new situations, in such areas as the sacraments, the appointment of new clerics, and the question of whether the Jewish ritual laws still applied to new Christians. See, e.g., Acts 2:38, 6:1-7, 15:1-29. And to this day, the bishops, the successors to the Apostles, led by the Pope, the successor of St. Peter, maintain and expand the inheritance of truth in the Church through their teaching authority, which is called the magisterium. They also proclaim the truth in the world through more informal means, such as books and homilies. During his six and a half years in office, Pope Benedict has exercised this teaching authority eloquently in three encyclical letters, seven scholarly books and numerous homilies. Papal encyclical letters are letters by the Pope to the bishops of the world, generally regarding doctrinal matters and/or pastoral situations. As Pope Pius XII wrote in his 1950 encyclical Humanae Generis, such letters do not usually state new doctrine, but rather apply doctrine to specific situations; however, if they do state new doctrine it is authoritative and should be accepted as authoritative by the faithful. Future articles will discuss Pope Benedict's books. This article will go over his three great encyclical letters and overall themes.

Pope Benedict signed his first encyclical entitled Deus Caritas Est (God is Love) on Christmas Day, 2005 and released it a month later. That encyclical contained two sections, one on the virtue of love in itself and the other on the application of that virtue to the world. The first part argued that human loves (e.g. friendships, family, romance, love of learning) are in themselves good and can point to that perfect love called agape that Christ shows us; but without this orientation to agape they descend into carnality and selfishness. (He did not mention it, but C.S. Lewis wrote in this theme in his book The Four Loves.) In the second part, Pope Benedict applied this principle to actions, saying that there is inseparability among the Church's essential mission: to proclaim the word of God in truth; to invoke the power of heaven in prayer liturgy; and to serve mankind in charity. He argued that the world does need a just civil ordering, as the Church has consistently maintained in her social teachings. However, as he pointed out "there is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love." As he argues, justice forms the baseline of society and love the completion of the human person.

About a year later, on November 30, 2006, Pope Benedict then turned to the virtue of hope in his encyclical Spees Salvi (Saved in Hope.) The letter begins by contrasting Christian hope of salvation with worldly attempts to achieve final salvation through such things as revolution or government, learning or technology. He upholds the desire for liberty and order, for learning and science as naturally good, but insufficient and indeed often dangerous if considered the only goal of human history. He argues that lesser hopes, for success, human

love, progress, are in themselves a good, but a good that must be guided by supernatural hope based upon the saving power of God. It is the hope of glory, a glory already to some degree present in us by faith and love, that guides us through the travails of history to our final homeland.

Published in the summer of 2010, Caritas in Veritate called for people to recognize that charity in truth is the core of all human callings, whether in family life, business, politics, science, or society. In that encyclical Pope Benedict criticized the sentimental view of love as simply a good feeling, divorced from truth. Rather, he argued that without truth, "love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way" of mere desire. By contrast, when one understands the truth of each person, redeemed by Christ called by God to everlasting glory, love of each person naturally follows. And, he argues that such love, far from being irrelevant, gives all other pursuits their final meaning. He thus argues that politics, economics, technology and the like, as much as faith, family and friendships, should be guided by this human-centered principle, rather than the pursuit of the sort of materialistic systems that lead man into "the trap of thinking he can bring about his own salvation, and end up promoting a dehumanized form of development."

The notion of authentic human development has also been a great theme of Pope Benedict's homilies and other addresses. Thus, for example, in several addresses, including his 2008 World Youth Day homily, his 2009 Christmas address to the Vatican Curia, and his 2010 annual speech to the Vatican diplomatic corps, he has focused on the concept of a "human ecology." On such occasions, he has pointed out that people rightly understand that there is an order to the physical environment that should be respected and kept pure, but we have largely lost the understanding that there is a "human ecology," an order of human nature in virtue, in family, and culture. And, as violating the natural order causes environmental crises, so ignoring this natural human order through decadence and consumerism has caused human crises in the family and society, a divorce from truth, and a slavery to pleasure and possessions. Pope Benedict has promoted an alliance of faith and reason as needed to cure these crises. Thus, in the greatly misunderstood 2006 address at the University of Regensburg, he argued that faith and reason, and religion and philosophy, need each other. As he pointed out, without reason, faith has no way of dialoguing with the world and can descend into violence; but without faith, reason cannot ennoble people, for it ignores the deepest longings and callings of the human heart. As Francis Campbell, the British ambassador to the Vatican in November 2008, "Probably the most central theme [of this papacy] is the very nature between the secular and religious in the Western tradition."