

POPE BENEDICT XVI

A Retrospective



MARKS OF HIS PAPACY



April 16, 1927 Born Joseph Ratzinger in Marktl am Inn, Bavaria, Germany, and baptized the same day

1939 Enters minor seminary

1951 Ordained a priest for Diocese of Munich

1953 Earns doctorate in theology from University of Munich

1962-1965 Participates in Second Vatican Council as a theological adviser

March 1977 Named archbishop of Munich and Freising

May 1977 Named to the College of Cardinals

1981 Named head of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

April 2005 Elected pope, chooses the name Pope Benedict XVI

February 28, 2013 Resigns from papacy, first such resignation in six hundred years

Pope Benedict XVI's papacy testifies to a churchman of scholarship and pastoral sensitivity.

Born in a devout Catholic family and baptized the day he was born, he felt one with the Church from his earliest days. As a boy, with his parents and brother and sister, he visited the Bavarian Shrine of Our Lady of Altötting, a place he returned to as pope. There, he prayed before the Black Madonna (as the smoke-charred linden wood image of Mary is called) and left at its base the ring he had received from Pope Paul VI. His intense fervor for Mary showed clearly in 2008 at Lourdes, where he said, "When speech can no longer find the right words, the need arises for a loving presence: we seek then the closeness not only of those who share the same blood or are linked to us by friendship, but also the closeness of those who are intimately bound to us by faith. Who would be more intimate to us than Christ and his holy mother, the Immaculate One?"¹

While a reserved man, Pope Benedict XVI's heart was touched by victims/survivors of child sexual abuse by clerics. On several visits, including his noted visit to the United States in 2008, he met personally with men and women whose lives were altered by the harrowing experience of abuse. He offered heartfelt comfort in this personal encounter, and on the bureaucratic level, he stiffened penalties for abusers and expanded the definitions of what constitutes sexual abuse to include child pornography.

When elected pope at age seventy-eight, he quietly told friends that, given his age and health, he wouldn't be a globe-trotter. However, he quickly realized that the best way to reach people was to go to them, and he did—first to World Youth Day in Germany, just months after his election. In the first five years alone, he traveled to five continents and fourteen countries, about 60,000 miles. He knew the power of the press and that if he went to desperate people in Africa, the media would follow. The eyes of the world might be opened to the scandal of poverty, the terrible distance between the rich and poor, and their lack of access to resources given by God for all.

As a scholar, he brought a laser-like focus to his writings. His encyclicals—one on hope, *Spe Salvi (On Christian Hope)*, and two others on love, *Deus Caritas Est (God Is Love)* and *Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)*—speak simply of profound truths.

Spe Salvi presents Jesus as the source of the hope that the world desperately desires. The pope recognizes that no human means can adequately redress the heinous wrongs within human history, such as the Holocaust, natural calamities, war, and terrorism; nor can human means bring forth total justice.

“No one and nothing can answer for centuries of suffering,”² the pope said. Yet he presents Jesus as the harbinger of hope. Pope Benedict XVI assures us that, with the coming of Jesus in glory, there is a resurrection of the flesh. There is justice. He reminds us that hope assures that every tear will be wiped away.

Caritas in Veritate, a social encyclical, seamlessly weaves together what many consider polar opposites: spirituality and human progress, “life ethics” and “social ethics,” justice and charity, personal ethical behavior and more just social structures, the concerns of rich nations and the needs of poor nations. The pope reminds humanity that the demands of love have both personal and social dimensions. Love applies to both “micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups)” and “macro-relationships (social, economic and political ones).”³ Pope Benedict XVI critiques the excesses of markets without justice, supports increases in international assistance to poorer nations, calls for action on the structural causes of global hunger, champions the rights of workers, and insists on fairer trade policies to help poor nations. He teaches that “the way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa.”⁴ In other words, a society that finds people expendable will find nature expendable. He declares that “a lack of respect for the right to life” weakens the “conscience of society” and its grasp of “human ecology” and thus “environmental ecology.” As he observes, “The book of nature is one and indivisible.”⁵

The first encyclical letter of his pontificate, *Deus Caritas Est*, summarizes the pope’s teachings on love. He reminds us that all our actions as Christians must be informed by a clear understanding of our faith. “God’s love for us is fundamental for our lives, and it raises important questions about who God is and who we are,”⁶ he said. Since God has loved us first, love is less a “command” than the response to the gift of God’s love.

For Pope Benedict XVI, love encompasses the whole of human existence. Man needs to both give love and receive it as a gift. The Eucharistic Communion, he says, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn. “A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented,”⁷ he said.

An “intimate encounter with God” leads to a “communion of will” in which we learn to look at the other person from the perspective of Jesus Christ. The pope expresses beautifully what this means when he writes, “Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave.”⁸

Opening his pontificate with a letter on love was both a wise move and a true “act of love” for the Church, in which he showed he clearly understood his new role as the universal pastor. God’s love is so fundamental to human existence that the pope proclaimed in the opening statements the reason for this letter, which would set the tone of his pontificate: “To speak of the love which God lavishes upon us and which we in turn must share with others.”⁹

The unprecedented resignation by a humble man aware of the weaknesses of old age testified to his love of the Church. When he felt he couldn’t give the papacy everything that he saw was needed, he did what hadn’t been done in about six hundred years—he stepped aside for a life of prayer. The teacher and scholar chose another pastoral service to the Church to whom he has given his entire life. ■



1 Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, September 15, 2008.

2 Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi (On Christian Hope)* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2007), no. 42.

3 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2009), no. 2.

4 *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 51.

5 *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 51.

6 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est (God Is Love)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006), no. 2.

7 *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 14.

8 *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 18.

9 *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1.

