

## **“HUMBLE LABORER IN THE LORD’S VINEYARD”: THE TOWERING LEGACY OF POPE BENEDICT XVI**

In the spring of 2005, I was assigned to the Saint Paul Seminary with duties both as liturgical coordinator and added duties as interim rector following the departure of Bishop Campbell, newly named as Bishop of Columbus (OH). On a bit of a **whim**, I headed out the door on the morning of April 19, intent upon procuring yellow and white bunting for the chapel front door in anticipation of the conclave electing a successor to Pope John Paul II. Officially out of my comfort zone, I sought out a **fabric store**. Questions abounded in my head: Where is the nearest one? What do I order? Does a “**yard**” of fabric refer to length or width? I was clueless! Thankfully, someone kindly assisted this novice **seamster**. Is that even the right word? On the return trip, I was listening to the local sports radio station KFAN when the host suddenly announced, “There is white smoke in St. Peter’s Square.” What?! **So soon?** I stepped on the gas, eager to get back to watch the announcement.

Elected after just **four ballots**, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger took the name of Benedict XVI. Even though he was clearly among the “favorites” he was a surprise choice, since I wrongly surmised that perhaps his role as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith may have **appeared** to enough cardinals to be an “enforcer of doctrine” more than a universal pastor. Thankfully, two-thirds of them +1 did **not** see it that way and the Church was the beneficiary. As pope, Benedict XVI was a true **humble shepherd** and teacher—just the man to follow the fruitful pontificate of John Paul II. Benedict’s impromptu greeting upon his election sums it up: “After the Great Pope John Paul II, the cardinals have elected me, a simple, **humble worker** in the Lord’s vineyard. I am comforted by the fact that the Lord knows how to work and act even with insufficient instruments. And above all, I entrust myself to your prayers.”

Pope Benedict XVI possessed a deep faith and **towering intellect**. While Pope John Paul II had intellectual chops and a mastery of languages, Benedict quietly labored as his “right-hand man” for a quarter century and his election signaled continuity. St. John Paul II was very philosophical, whereas Benedict was an accomplished **theologian** and teacher. While serving as professor of dogmatic theology at the University of Regensburg, he was named Archbishop of Munich and Freising in 1977, becoming the first diocesan priest in 80 years to take on the pastoral governance of the large Bavarian Diocese. He chose as his episcopal motto: “Fellow Worker in the Truth” (cf. III John 1:8). Just a month after his episcopal ordination, he was named a Cardinal, going from guiding **doctoral students** in the spring to Cardinal Archbishop in **three months!** Talk about the fast track!

In 1981, John Paul II called him to the Curia. There, he humbly and ably guarded Catholic doctrine, dealing with several controversial theological disputes with an equal dose of clarity and charity. In 2005, he had the **unenviable** task of following the long pontificate of John Paul II, and yet he never sought to be anyone but himself. Not possessing the natural charisma of his predecessor, he assumed a **fatherly role** as teacher. His Wednesday Audiences were truly a *tour de force* of doctrine, spirituality and history all rolled into one. Theologically, he could speak “off the cuff” in a way that demonstrated he was thoroughly **steeped** in the tradition, but never appearing “preachy” or drawing attention to his erudition! His series of addresses on the Church Fathers provided a **treasure trove** of insight into how our Catholic faith developed. His three-volume “Jesus of Nazareth” series, available in English through **Ignatius Press**, is as profound as it is accessible to laity and clergy alike.

Still, Benedict XVI faced some strong headwinds as pope. In his attempt to extend an olive branch of dialogue to the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, in 2009 the pope **lifted** the **excommunication** of four bishops consecrated by Archbishop Lefebvre without papal mandate in 1988. While they remained suspended, such fine canonical distinctions were lost when it came to light that one of them—Bishop Richard Williamson—had **denied** the full reality of the **Holocaust**. In a letter to the world’s bishops, the pope acknowledged “that consulting the information available on the internet would have made it possible to perceive the problem early on.” His sincere gesture towards reconciliation backfired. How difficult it must be to steer the Barque of Peter! The pope canonized more than 40 saints including St. John Henry Newman.

When his resignation took effect on February 28, 2013, the images of him being whisked away in a helicopter to Castel Gandolfo, waving to the assembled pilgrims, and the closing of the doors precisely at 8:00 p.m. Rome time were unforgettable.

Every pope during my lifetime has influenced me in some positive way and my **reverence** for the office of the papacy is undying. But taken as a whole, Pope Benedict XVI has **influenced** me the **most**. His love of the Church Fathers has informed my teaching and preaching, while his careful attention to the sacred liturgy has deepened my approach to the Sunday Mass. His penchant for **steering clear** of the limelight revealed a **humility** surpassed only by his unwavering faith. It took great courage to step aside— the first papal resignation since 1415— perhaps paving the way for this to become more common. Benedict took on the burden of office with dignity and grace. Reportedly, his last words (whispered in a soft but clearly distinguishable voice) were, “Lord, I love you.” Could any of us hope for anything more when the Lord calls us? May this gentle and humble shepherd now share in His master’s joy.

- Pray for the Catholic Church in **Nicaragua**, as 2022 was a disastrous year for the nation. Religious liberty has all but vanished and upwards of **140 attacks** from the Sandinista dictatorship have been directed towards the Catholic Church. Non-profit religious organizations have been shut down, while both the apostolic Nuncio and the Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity were **expelled** for no reason.
- It’s hard to believe that just **60 years ago** (January 14, 1963), George Wallace was sworn into the Governor’s office in Alabama. During his inauguration, he declared: “segregation now; segregation tomorrow; segregation forever!” While there has been significant progress in racial relations, we must strive to build solid relationships across all racial, cultural and creedal lines.
- While I attended several papal events with Pope Benedict XVI, I **never met him** personally, at least as pope! However, Cardinal Ratzinger visited St. John Vianney Seminary during my junior year in **1984**. He offered Mass and later delivered a wonderful lecture. We each had a chance to greet him individually.
- I am deeply grateful for the tremendous generosity that our Cathedral parishioners and visitors displayed this Christmas. Your faithful stewardship keeps us moving forward in hope!
- The Christmas season ends Monday January 9, the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Calling all **volunteers**— the outdoor creche comes down next Saturday, January 14th beginning at 8:30 a.m. Many hands make **light** (sort of!) work.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector