

From “grand inquisitor” to pope: Benedict XVI to head crusade vs. secularism, democracy

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21 April 2005

With the selection of Josef Ratzinger as the new pope, the Roman Catholic hierarchy has placed at its head a hard-line enforcer of Church dogma, and one of the Vatican’s fiercest opponents of not only Marxism, but liberalism, secularism, science and virtually all things modern.

The 78-year-old cardinal, who took the name Pope Benedict XVI, served for 23 years as Pope John Paul II’s arbiter of doctrinal orthodoxy, disciplining clerics and theologians who questioned Catholic dogma on such issues a birth control, abortion, divorce, homosexuality and papal infallibility. As prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the successor institution to the Inquisition, Ratzinger persecuted and suppressed the so-called “liberation theology” in Latin America, and banned, censored or excommunicated liberal clerics in Europe and North America, earning himself such nicknames as “grand inquisitor” and, among his fellow Germans, “Der Panzerkardinal.”

On the eve of his election as pope, Ratzinger delivered a sermon in which he implicitly reaffirmed his position that all religions outside of Roman Catholicism are “defective,” denouncing what he called “the dictatorship of relativism.”

Ratzinger’s ascendancy to the pinnacle of the Catholic Church progressed initially through academic channels, and later within the Curia in Rome. With the exception of a short period as an assistant priest and curate in Munich immediately following his appointment as a priest in 1951, and his four years as the archbishop of Munich and Freising (1977 to 1981), he lacks any close connection to ordinary churchgoers.

With the selection of Ratzinger, the Curia has elevated to its highest post the consummate insider—a man whose allegiances lie above all with the apparatus and hierarchy of the Church. This point has been largely ignored in the media hoopla surrounding the death of his predecessor, John Paul II, and the selection process for the new pope.

Hours of media coverage were devoted to the minutiae of the medieval election ritual, with endless commentaries on the significance of white vs. black smoke from the papal chimney. Cameras focused lovingly on the flowing purple robes of the cardinals, but the thoroughly undemocratic and conspiratorial character of the selection process was passed over in silence.

In fact, nearly all of the 115 cardinals (average age of 71) who were eligible to vote had been appointed by Ratzinger’s predecessor—often in the face of bitter opposition from their dioceses, and with the likely participation of Ratzinger himself. John Paul II’s closest confidant, Ratzinger belonged to the small group of cardinals who had participated in the election of the two previous popes. According to media reports, based on his influence in the Curia, Ratzinger already had a solid block of 50 votes behind him when the cardinals entered the conclave on Monday. For the election, he needed 77 votes.

As a result, so-called reform candidates, such as the Italian Carlo Maria

Martini and a number of cardinals from South America, had no real chance of being elected. The Curia’s control of the election process had been made even more firm by a new method of voting introduced by John Paul II, whereby, after 30 rounds of voting, a simple majority, rather than a two-thirds margin, was sufficient to elect the new pontiff. This rule weakened the position of minority candidates and factions. It meant that opponents of Ratzinger could not stall his election to the point where his supporters would be prepared to accept a compromise candidate.

Ordinary churchgoers—according to the Church, one billion worldwide—were, of course, not allowed to play any role whatsoever. They had not the slightest influence on the selection of the head of one of the richest and most powerful institutions in the world.

The pope, moreover, exercises dictatorial powers within the Church. He reigns for the remainder of his life; his decrees are regarded as “infallible”; he can personally appoint all those who occupy major positions in the Church hierarchy; and he can change the rules governing the functioning of the Church as he wishes.

Josef Ratzinger was born in the Bavarian town of Marktl am Inn in 1927, the son of a policeman. At the age of 14, Josef joined the Hitler youth movement. Later he declared he had been forced to join. There is little to indicate otherwise. Despite the good relations between Church leaders and the Nazi leadership, the Catholic circles in which he grew up tended to keep their distance from the Nazis. Antagonisms arose because the Nazis intervened in aspects of life which the Catholic Church regarded as its own preserve.

What is without doubt, however, is that, following his experiences with the Nazi dictatorship, Ratzinger developed into a dogmatic Catholic, rather than a convinced democrat.

At the end of the war, he took up studies in theology and philosophy, and in 1951 was appointed to the priesthood. In 1953 he graduated as a doctor of theology and in 1957 the 30-year-old qualified as a university lecturer in fundamental theology at the University of Munich. From 1954 to 1981 he taught fundamental theology, doctrine and the history of doctrine at a number of German universities.

During the same period he began his ascent within the Church hierarchy. Between 1962 and 1965 he took part in the Second Vatican Council as official council theologian. In March 1977, he was appointed archbishop of Munich and Freising, and elevated to the post of cardinal just three months later. His acquaintance with the Polish cardinal Karol Wojtyła, the future John Paul II, stems from this period.

In 1981, three years after his appointment as pope, John Paul called upon Ratzinger to take up the position of supreme guardian of the faith in Rome.

In the 1960s, at the time of the Second Vatican Council, Ratzinger was regarded as relatively liberal. In 1968, together with the theologian Hans

Küng from Tübingen, he opposed “coercive measures adopted against erroneous theological standpoints.”

According to his biographers and his own memoirs, the eruption of left-wing student protest and mass workers’ struggles in the late 1960s had a profound impact on Ratzinger, propelling him to the right and bringing to the fore his deepest political instinct: hatred and fear of socialist revolution.

Subsequently, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he imposed coercive measures against a range of critical theologians—including Küng, who was removed from office following pressure from the Vatican.

As “grand inquisitor,” he rigidly enforced reactionary positions that provoked opposition even among many Catholics. Papal decrees denouncing contraception and abortion, confirming the subordination of women, denouncing stem-cell research, opposing an increased role for laymen in the life of the Church, barring marriage for priests and abhorring same-sex relationships—all bear the signature of Ratzinger. He went so far as to officially condemn masturbation.

Just last year, the Congregation published a 37-page “Letter on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World.” Drawing upon the Bible, the letter defined the role of women in terms of virginity followed by marriage, motherhood and support for the male head of family. The letter approvingly cited Genesis 3:16: “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”

In Germany, Ratzinger incurred opposition not only from churchgoers, but also from the majority of bishops, when he opposed a more liberal attitude toward divorced couples and demanded that the Church withdraw from advising pregnant women. Such consultation has been part of legal abortion procedures since 1995.

In South America, he organized a systematic campaign against “liberation theologians” who called for the Church to play a greater role in protecting the interests of the poor and oppressed. At Ratzinger’s behest, the well known liberation theologian Leonardo Boff was driven out of the priesthood in 1992.

While Ratzinger and John Paul II were largely in agreement over these issues, it appears that the guardian of the faith did not share the views of the pope on developing closer collaboration between the Catholic Church and other confessions. This is evident in the paper “Dominus Jesus” that Ratzinger prepared in 2000 for the Congregation, which was then signed by the pope. It asserted the supreme role of the Catholic Church, and was regarded as an affront by officials of other churches, Christian and non-Christian alike.

The paper stated: “Just as there is one Christ, so there exists a single body of Christ, a single Bride of Christ: a single Catholic and apostolic Church.”

The core of Ratzinger’s world view is the rejection of modernity and the Enlightenment.

The German newspaper *Die Zeit* summarized his views a year ago as follows: “If one is to believe Ratzinger’s older writings, liberal philosophy going back to the Enlightenment is a dangerous superstition. It has severed the godly link between belief and science and does not tolerate any truth greater than itself. Liberal philosophers confuse subjective desires with the cosmic meaning of the world. They are blind to a truth which precedes their reason—the pre-political truth of religion.”

Another German press commentary declared: “That the highly developed industrial countries are losing their beliefs and soul, that ancient institutions such as families and marriage are breaking up, and that such social erosion brings with it considerable risks and dangers—this is also a favorite theme of Ratzinger. In this respect as well he was at one with his predecessor. He once wrote: ‘Our culture based on technology and prosperity is based on the conviction that basically anything is possible. The issue of God is then no longer relevant.’”

While Ratzinger criticized and fought tendencies within the Church that were sympathetic to social struggles, such as liberation theology, he was receptive to authoritarian, right-wing tendencies. At a ceremony in Pamplona in 1998, for example, the head of the reactionary Opus Dei order, Javier Echevarria Rodriguez, awarded Ratzinger an honorary doctorate.

Ratzinger’s choice of name Benedict XVI surprised many. It had been generally expected that he would adopt the name John Paul III in appreciation of his predecessor. Bearing in mind that the name of a newly appointed pope has programmatic significance, it is worth recalling the papacy of Benedict XV, who occupied the Holy See during the First World War, from 1914 to 1922.

Benedict XV is often described as a “pope of peace,” and the fact that Ratzinger has sought to link up with his tradition has led to some positive commentary in liberal and “left” circles.

The leader of the Green Party faction in the German parliament, Katrin Göring-Eckard, declared that a German pope was a source of satisfaction “irrespective of how one regarded the former Cardinal Ratzinger.” He had made a good choice by naming himself “Benedict,” she went on, because “the last Benedict was a great advocate of peace who, during his papacy, tirelessly campaigned for an end to the First World War.”

In reality, the neutral stance adopted by the Vatican during the First World War and Benedict’s endeavors for a peace settlement had nothing to do with a principled opposition to the imperialist slaughter. The Vatican, as a state as well as a Church, could only lose from the war, and was therefore interested in its rapid end. On both sides of the battle lines, major powers with considerable Catholic populations were involved in the fighting—France on one side and Germany and Austria-Hungary on the other. By taking sides, the Vatican would have risked splitting the Church.

Even before the war began, the Vatican sought to establish greater political independence from the major powers. It abolished the right of Catholic great powers, in particular Austria-Hungary, to exercise a veto in the selection of a pope, and introduced papal elections by a secret conclave.

Giacomo della Chiesa, elected as Pope Benedict XV just one month after the outbreak of war, was an experienced diplomat. Born into a noble family in Genoa, he had worked for years as a diplomat for the Vatican. He insisted on the neutrality of the Vatican during the entire war and from 1917 onwards encouraged US President Woodrow Wilson to initiate peace negotiations.

Ratzinger may well have had Benedict XV in mind when he chose his name. Not because of the earlier pope’s diplomatic activities, but because he was, like Ratzinger himself, a bitter opponent of “modernity,” i.e., of rationalism, democracy and, above all, socialism.

In an apostolic letter which he published only few months after taking office, Benedict XV vehemently opposed all those who put their trust in understanding and reason. Ratzinger’s precursor thundered: “Infatuated and carried away by a lofty idea of the human intellect, by which God’s good gift has certainly made incredible progress in the study of nature, confident in their own judgment, and contemptuous of the authority of the Church, they have reached such a degree of rashness as not to hesitate to measure by the standard of their own mind even the hidden things of God and all that God has revealed to men. Hence arose the monstrous errors of ‘Modernism,’ which Our Predecessor rightly declared to be ‘the synthesis of all heresies,’ and solemnly condemned. ... Therefore it is Our will that the law of our forefathers should still be held sacred: ‘Let there be no innovation; keep to what has been handed down.’”

These words are contained in the encyclical “Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum” from November 1, 1914, which also condemns the World War. As the text of the encyclical demonstrates, the main objective of the pope was the defense of the existing order that was threatened by the impact of the war. The Vatican was motivated by fears of social upheavals

and socialist uprisings, which did, in fact, take place at the end of the war—in Russia, Germany, Hungary and many other countries. For this reason, the encyclical categorically defends the existing authorities.

It condemns every form of democracy: “Ever since the source of human powers has been sought apart from God the Creator and Ruler of the Universe, in the free will of men, the bonds of duty, which should exist between superior and inferior, have been so weakened as almost to have ceased to exist.”

Benedict XV regarded the crisis of bourgeois society as the product of the turn away from faith and religion: “For ever since the precepts and practices of Christian wisdom ceased to be observed in the ruling of states, it followed that, as they contained the peace and stability of institutions, the very foundations of states necessarily began to be shaken. Such, moreover, has been the change in the ideas and the morals of men, that unless God comes soon to our help, the end of civilization would seem to be at hand.”

This, it seems, is how Ratzinger sees the world today.

The term of office of his predecessor, John Paul II, was dominated by the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, in which the pope played an important and active role. He ensured that the powerful movement of the Polish working class, which developed under the banner of the Solidarity movement, remained under the influence of the Catholic Church and did not develop in an independent socialist direction.

Ratzinger has taken office in the shadow of the Iraq war, growing tensions between the major imperialist powers, and a deep social and political crisis of bourgeois society. He reacts in a manner similar to that of the pope whose name he has assumed: by encouraging the most backward religious, anti-enlightenment and anti-democratic prejudices.

Even more than his predecessor, who traveled the world and sought conciliation with other confessions, including the Jewish and Islamic, Benedict XVI emphasizes the necessity of a strong, Christian Europe. A number of commentators have made the point that the best known Benedict in the history of the church, the founder of the Benedictine order, Benedict of Nursia, was declared patron saint of Europe by Pope Paul VI in 1964.



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