

Remembering Benedict XVI

On the eve of the new year, the Church bade farewell to a great man of the Church, our past Holy Father, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. In a certain sense, we already said our farewell when he retired from the papacy nearly 10 years ago. But now, after a long and faithful life, he has gone to our Lord, and we pray that he is resting at last with our Father.

Whenever a pope departs from this life, there is a certain sense of loss and sadness in the Church. For good reason do we call our popes “Holy Father,” because they hold the role of the father of our Church family. And Benedict was indeed a faithful father who gave his life to our Lord and the Church without reservation. We are justified in feeling a measure of sadness at this parting from a man who was a good and holy father to us all.

But along with sadness there is also a sense of gratitude. In so many ways, Pope Benedict was a gift of God to his Church. He was a theologian, a great teacher, a scholar, and an evangelist. The young Joseph Ratzinger first came to public prominence when he served as one of the consulting priest theologians at the Second Vatican Council. In fact, he made a significant contribution to the Council, which he described as the most important event in the life of the Church of the last century. He had a talent for teaching and preaching the faith, and was eventually appointed by Pope St. Paul VI as Archbishop of Munich and Freising. Several years later, he was called to Rome by Pope St. John Paul II to serve as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He was a very close collaborator with John Paul II and played a key role in his long and fruitful pontificate. One of his many great accomplishments included the development and completion of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which continues to be a beautiful summary and exposition of our Catholic Faith.

After spending many long years in the service of the Church, when most people would have already retired, Joseph Ratzinger accepted an even more demanding call, his election as pope after the death of John Paul II. It was the last thing that he desired, and in fact he had tried on more than one occasion to retire from his duties and return to his native Germany. But he accepted his election because he saw it as God’s will and a further call to serve the Church. He continued to teach the faith with his usual clarity and depth, and he carried forward the project of implementing the vision of the Second Vatican Council for the Church. Although not widely acknowledged, Benedict worked hard to address the unfolding crisis of clerical abuse in the Church, and he was the first pope to meet with victims of such abuse. He traveled the world like a missionary and guided the Church through challenging times with wisdom and prayer.

Much has been said about the brilliance and theological learning of Pope Benedict, and there is no doubt that he was a great scholar and teacher. But first and foremost, he was a disciple, a follower of Jesus. In all things, he referred us to Jesus, and all of his teaching placed Jesus in the center. When he became our pope, he made it clear that Christianity isn’t an ethical system, it is not an ideology or a philosophy. Christianity is first and foremost a relationship with a person, with the living person Jesus Christ, our Savior. In fact, the last major theological writing that he completed was a series of three books about Jesus of Nazareth. This was the culmination of his scholarly effort, and he wanted nothing more than to lead us into a deeper communion with our Savior. Many have doubted that truth exists, or that truth can be known, but Pope Benedict recognized that there is truth, and that it can be known. When others wavered, he held fast to this truth, the truth revealed to us by God in Jesus Christ.

Over the years, Cardinal Ratzinger/Pope Benedict was unfairly attacked in the media and in certain theological circles as a rigid, harsh inquisitor, principally because of his fidelity to the faith of the Church. But this caricature of Benedict was far from the truth. He was a rather shy but warm-hearted man who remained true to Christ no matter the price. In times of uncertainty and turbulence, he was a steady presence in the Church, and he always helped us to hold fast to the truths of our faith. Many years ago, I started reading the works of Joseph Ratzinger when I was a seminarian, and I still do, because even now he unfolds the richness of our faith with beauty and grace. I never met him personally, but I did hear him speak, and in many ways, I feel that I knew him.

Throughout his life, he was known for his kindness and his humility. He was always deeply prayerful, and in his last years, after he stepped down from the Chair of Peter, he dedicated himself to a life of quiet prayer for the Church. So, as we make our final farewell, once again we give thanks for Pope Benedict, and for the blessing that he was to the Church. God sent us this man in our time, and the Church has been profoundly blessed because of him. We pray for him as he reaches the end of his labors here on earth, and ask our Lord to receive him and give him rest.