

Pope Benedict XVI Requiem Homily

I was 15 years old, a recent convert to Catholicism, when I saw a book someone had left behind in the narthex of St Mary's in downtown Greenville. *The Ratzinger Report* was an interview between Italian journalist Vittorio Messori and Josef Cardinal Ratzinger, the prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. In that book I discovered what it meant to have an intellectual approach to the mystery of faith, and by the end of it, I knew that I wanted to be a theologian, I wanted to be “just like that guy.” Little did I know as I discovered a path for my future in that one book that this German Shepherd, as he would be called affectionately, and not so affectionately, by millions, would chart the course of my entire life, and my ministry as a priest.

You don't realise how much someone means to you often until they're gone, and you look back at ordinary moments that were actually filled with extraordinary graces that only later are revealed in their fullness. Very often as I crossed St Peter's Square early in the morning to serve Mass in the Basilica of the Prince of the Apostles, Cardinal Ratzinger, clad in his black cassock and fedora, would be going to work. *Buon giorno, Eminenza!* I don't know how many times I said it, but that is all I ever said, because I was too starstruck as a young levite at the time to waste the time of the greatest living intellect of our time. Shortly after I entered the seminary, his seminal work, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, was published. I carried into the chapel with me for adoration until one of the seminarians called me to task for carrying such a “dangerous” book into the seminary. He switched the cover for a book cover of the encyclicals of Paul VI, a small gift for which I would always remain grateful, even when I read that book too, in which there was also wisdom to be gained.

When John Paul II died, and the fevered cries of *Santo subito* seized the Eternal City, I was privileged as a student at the papal seminary to attend Mass after Mass of the *novemdiales* of mourning for the Polish Pope, and Mass after Mass of the Holy Spirit for the election of a new pope. Mass after Mass, and cardinal after cardinal filed by in procession to hushed sounds, and every time Josef Ratzinger would pass by, the crowds erupted in applause for him,

which I am quite confident made no sense to him. I don't know if that man ever quite understood the depth with which so many of us loved him, and saw in him a compelling image of what it meant to be a Christian disciple, and a priest of Jesus Christ. I do know that every single time he walked by, I couldn't keep myself from yelling over the crowds towards him, *Viva il Papa!*

And then, it happened. I had just finished class at the Gregorian on 19 April 2005 when a classmate suggested we go over to St Peter's to see what was happening. As soon we entered the piazza, there was smoke coming from the Sistine Chapel, but was it white? Was it black? Was it as grey as the sky that day? And there was no bell. We stood transfixed waiting for this stupid bell to roar back and the clapper resound that a new pope had been elected. I thought my heart was going to jump out of my chest because I knew in my heart of hearts who the Pope was.

Some of my seminary brothers had talked for years about how the Church seemed like it was in suspended animation and just needed to be taken off pause. So when we happened to see each other in the cortile of the seminary right outside the refectory, we screamed with joy like lunatics, and yelled, PLAY! Over and over again. Until we opened the door to the refectory to the community standing behind their chairs in stony silence. One of the seminarians sarcastically commented to me, "Congratulations," as if my candidate in a presidential election had won. The superiors, many of whom were part of the infamous generation of 1968 that Ratzinger had warned us all about in his writings, made all the right noises as one would expect of a gentleman whose hated rival had bested him. And so it was that I realized that Pope Benedict XVI was going to begin his ministry as Supreme Pontiff walking with Jesus through a very long and arduous Holy Week, with every part of the walk of Christ imaged in that of His Vicar on earth.

I sat there as he took possession of the Chair of Peter transfixed as if I were in a master class with a gentle and kind grandfatherly professor who could make the most complex concepts simple and clear, and I knew that the classroom of the Church had never seen a

giant of this magnitude, and I got to be in on it all. I was a transitional deacon at the time, and was present in the Pope's cathedral, St John Lateran, as he became the visible center of unity for Christ's Church. I was seated behind a pillar and saw absolutely nothing the whole time, and by the time I was asked to distribute Communion all the way outside of the Basilica as far away as you could get from him and still be technically at the same address, I was fuming. But then, as I distributed the Bread of Life to the thousands pressing against the barricades far after the *Ite missa est* was sung, I knew that it was my vocation to go back to South Carolina to shepherd the flock there, in communion with a man who was quite literally my hero. I was, and have remained ever since, a priest of the generation of Benedict the Great.

There were many gifts that I have received from that humble coworker in the truth in the Lord's vineyard, but there are two which I cannot fail to mention. *What earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too, and it cannot be all of a sudden entirely forbidden or even considered harmful. It behooves all of us to preserve the riches which have developed in the Church's faith and prayer, and to give them their proper place.* On 7 July 2007, Pope Benedict XVI issued *Summorum Pontificum*. He ended the liturgy wars by freeing the ancient rites of worship from an uncertain bondage. And he did so, not because he was a traditionalist ideologue of the sort that turned the Missal into a weapon, but because it was the right thing to do. His call for mutual enrichment of the ordinary and extraordinary forms of the Roman Rite was a prophetic gesture, but like many a prophet, he has been derided and mocked for it ever since. But there are those who have discerned the movement of the Spirit in that gesture as one of reconciliation and peace, and a parish like ours at Prince of Peace has found its identity in living that charism of taking out of the storehouse treasures old and new. *O beauty, ever ancient and ever new*, St Augustine spoke of the Lord Jesus Christ. And Benedict, who knew that church doctor so well, and who I am confident, will one day be recognized as doctor of the Church as well, unleashed that beauty of the splendor of sacred truth on the world.

Then, on 4 November 2009, *Anglicanorum coetibus*, the other great prophetic gift of the Bavarian Pope to the Church. For those of us who, through no fault of our own were born outside of the Catholic Church, and were called to full communion with the Church founded by Christ, we knew what it was like to have a real relationship with Christ and faith, but were heirs to theological controversies that had rent Christians apart from each other even as the Church remained one, for 500 years. Ratzinger in *Dominus Jesus* at the beginning of this third millennium had clarified the boundaries of what it meant for Jesus to save and for the Church to be one. But he also recognized the Catholic potentialities of Anglicanism in particular, and the elements in the communities borne forth from the Protestant movement that tended towards a fuller expression of unity among those who call Jesus Lord. He found a place within the Church for all that was true, good and beautiful that had developed during a time of separation, a time that, for those who were bold enough to follow the call of the Vicar of Christ for unity, would be over and done with. Even though I was not able to be a part of the personal ordinariates established for former Anglicans in the Catholic Church, I remain spiritually united to them as one who has also walked that walked and left the land of slavery and bondage for that of milk and honey, to use the phrase of John Henry Newman, who was beatified by Benedict XVI as a precursor to those ordinariates.

But then came 11 February 2013. *With full freedom I declare that I renounce the ministry of Bishop of Rome, Successor of Saint Peter.* The man who had imaged the Last Supper and the Garden of Gethsemane during an eventful papacy was abandoning himself to the providence of the Father as Jesus did on His Cross. And so began Benedict's quiet but fruitful Good Friday, that emptying of himself in abject humility as sure as the Master He loved so much did, an act of heroic self-sacrifice for the good of the Church. Catholics around the world have struggled to understand the meaning of this act ever since, and we probably won't know the full impact of this act until there is new heaven and a new earth. But as Benedict XVI, now Pope Emeritus, was lifted away in a helicopter to Castelgondolfo to begin this monastic

existence of contemplation and my own heart sank, I firmly believe that there was another aspect to this vocation.

At present there is a power (you know what I mean) which holds him in check, so that he may not shew himself before the time appointed to him; meanwhile, the conspiracy of revolt is already at work; only, he who checks it now will be able to check it, until he is removed from the enemy's path. Then it is that the rebel will shew himself; and the Lord Jesus will destroy him with the breath of his mouth, overwhelming him with the brightness of his presence. The second letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, verses 6 to 8, describes the Great Restrainer who holds back the full fury of the spirit of the anti-Christ. Is this a verse for our time, for a future time, or for the end times? I do not know. But I do know that in the mystery of God's Providence, the life and ministry of Benedict XVI was as a restrainer against all sorts of deceitful untruths about faith and morals that have led people away from the God he loved so much. That restrainer's quiet but strong voice is no longer with us. Will all hell be let loose on the Church, or do we dare to hope that the restoration of all things in Christ will come even when it is darkest before the dawn?

Josef Ratzinger was born and baptized on Holy Saturday in 1927 in the font whose water had been blessed next to the Paschal Candle lit from a new fire, a sign of new hope and new life in the Risen Lord. The man who was to be Pope Benedict ended his Passion, his Good Friday, on the last day of the year, 31 December 2022. It is the end of an age. It is the end of an era. A new chapter in the journey of the pilgrim church towards Sion is opening. Will he one day be celebrated on his *dies natalis* into heaven, sharing the day with Pope St Sylvester, who confirmed the first ecumenical council at Nicea, proclaiming Christ's divinity? Pope Benedict's last words, as reported by Georg Gänswein, his faithful secretary, were, *Jesus, ich liebe dich. Jesus, I love you.* We die as we live, and the little boy who wrote the Christ Child at Christmas 1934, *Dear Baby Jesus, soon you will come down to earth. You will bring joy to children. You will bring joy to me too.* That little boy lived and died in the joy of the Incarnate Word, serving the extension of the Incarnate Word, the Church. We pray tonight that this servant

of the Lord, who has touched our lives so profoundly, may rest in peace and rise in glory. We may be tempted to see his Passover to eternity as an image of the Ascension, when the Paschal Candle is snuffed out as Jesus's visible presence passes away from us to invite us to faith in things not seen. But for me, even though the visible light of Josef Ratzinger, lit on that Holy Saturday in 1927 will not be palpable to us again until the Second Coming, it is clear that the flame of resurrection glory given to him has been handed on along with the faith it inspires.

Now we know the praises of this pillar, which glowing fire ignites for God's honor, a fire into many flames divided, yet never dimmed by sharing of its light. May this flame be found still burning by the Morning Star: the one Morning Star who never sets, Christ your Son, who, coming back from death's domain, has shed his peaceful light on humanity, and lives and reigns for ever and ever. Rejoice, let Mother Church also rejoice, arrayed with the lightning of his glory, let this holy building shake with joy.