



ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON

# THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

THE CHAIR OF SAINT PETER

## CATECHESIS ON THE PAPACY

### *The Man Who Would Become Pope Benedict XVI*

*By Msgr. Kevin Hart*

It was God's plan from all eternity that, at this moment in history, a man named Joseph Alois Ratzinger would one day be pope, the 264th successor of St. Peter. As Vicar of Christ, he would continue on a universal level the three-fold ministry of Jesus as priest, prophet and king. Who were the people and what were the circumstances that God placed in Joseph Ratzinger's life that led him, through many trials and hardships, from a little town in Germany to the throne of Peter? How did these people and circumstances prepare Joseph Ratzinger to assume the office and responsibility to teach, to rule and to sanctify the universal Church?

Joseph Ratzinger was born on April 16, 1927 in the town of Marktl am Inn, a market town in central southern Germany. He was born into a family of great faith and humble origins. His father was a policeman and his mother was an artisan and cook. His brother, Georg, became a priest, and his sister, Maria, was a housekeeper. The family's Catholic faith was very strong. The seed of his vocation to the priesthood was apparent at the age of five. He was among a group of children in the small village of Traunstein who welcomed the visiting cardinal archbishop of Munich with flowers. Struck by the cardinal's brilliant red robes, he announced on the spot that he planned to be a cardinal. God had planned on that, too.

The faith he experienced at home and the Christian formation he received in Traunstein prepared him for the harsh times he experienced under the Nazi domination of Europe. He witnessed the beating of his parish priest as he was preparing to celebrate Mass. His cousin, 14 years old at the time (the same age as the young Joseph), had Down Syndrome and was murdered by the Nazis in their program

to do away with those who were physically or mentally imperfect. At that same age, he was forced to join the Hitler Youth Corps. He was a most unenthusiastic and inactive member, mirroring his father's disdain for the Nazi regime.

At age 16, Joseph was drafted into the German army as an anti-aircraft gunner and then trained in the infantry. In 1945, as the Allied Forces drew closer to his post, he deserted the army and found his way back home to Traunstein. He was put into a POW camp for a few months during the summer of 1945. Shortly after his release, he and his brother, Georg, entered the seminary in Traunstein. Both brothers were ordained to the priesthood on June 29, 1951, the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul.

But these harsh wartime experiences bore good fruit in the mind and heart of the future pope. It was precisely through the suffering, the loss of human dignity, the disregard for Christian values—all brought about by the secularism of a godless regime—that Joseph discovered the beauty and truth of faith in Christ. He had seen and experienced what life was like when beauty and faith played no role. This concern for the truth, and the beauty of that truth, would consume Joseph Ratzinger for the rest of his life.

The following years after ordination afforded him the necessary preparation to teach, to learn and to deepen his faith and knowledge of the truth, in preparation for his future responsibility to carry on Jesus' teaching ministry for the universal Church. Several years after earning his doctorate in theology, he began a long teaching career, specializing in fundamental and dogmatic theology, and he taught at universities throughout Germany. From 1962 to 1965, he

served as the theological advisor to Joseph Cardinal Frings of Cologne in all the sessions of the Second Vatican Council.

When Pope Paul VI named Father Ratzinger as the archbishop of Munich, he chose as his episcopal motto, “Cooperators of the Truth.” In his autobiographical work, *Milestones*, he wrote, “I chose that motto because in today’s world the theme of truth is omitted almost entirely, as something too great for man, and yet everything collapses if truth is missing”—a lesson he learned well from the tragedies of World War II.

One of his resources for expanding his vision of the truth is his linguistic prowess. He is fluent not only in his native German, but also in French, Italian, Spanish, English and Latin. He can also read ancient Greek and biblical Hebrew.

Joseph Ratzinger has also been a prolific writer. In addition to numerous articles and books written prior to his election, he has authored three papal encyclicals. In 1972, along with Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac (both later named Cardinals) and other important theologians, he initiated the highly reputable theological journal, *Communio*.

He had served as the archbishop of Munich for only four years when Pope John Paul II appointed him as the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This congregation has authority over the teaching of Catholic doctrine. A consummate theologian himself, Cardinal Ratzinger was well equipped to evaluate the orthodoxy of the writings and teachings of theologians throughout the world.

This appointment also marks a change in the direction of Joseph Ratzinger’s journey of faith. He would have fewer pastoral opportunities and less time to teach because his administrative responsibilities were so overwhelming. Over the span of the 23 years he spent in this position, Cardinal Ratzinger submitted his resignation to Pope John Paul II three times. He wanted some time to write and to teach. And on all three occasions, his offer was refused. Stepping down as Prefect was not God’s plan for him at that time.

In fact, it seems as if Cardinal Ratzinger was unaware of God’s plan for him until just before he was elected pope. He had planned, after the election was over, quietly to retire. During a subsequent interview, the new pope confessed, “At a certain point [in the election process] I prayed to God, ‘Please, don’t do this to me.’ Evidently, this time, he didn’t listen to me.”

In terms of preparation for assuming the governance of the universal Church, his 23 years working in the Vatican were an invaluable opportunity to understand how the Church “works on the inside.” He also served on numerous other Vatican commissions and congregations. In all these experiences, the Lord gave him the opportunity to develop a keen insight into the complexity of the world and of the Church that prepared him to serve as pope of the Church he had served for his entire life.

But the governance of the Church cannot be limited to administrative responsibilities. To govern the Church means to govern as a shepherd. In his homily given at the Mass where he received the pallium, a symbol which the bishops of Rome have worn since the fourth century, the new pope commented on his role as chief shepherd of the Church: “The symbolism of the pallium is even more concrete: the lamb’s wool is meant to represent the lost, sick or weak sheep which the shepherd places on his shoulders and carries to the waters of life... The human race—every one of us—is the sheep lost in the desert which no longer knows the way. The Son of God will not let his happen.”

Pope Benedict XVI has resigned the office of the papacy as of February 28, 2013. Nevertheless, let us always remember that from all eternity, God chose Joseph Alois Ratzinger to be the bishop of Rome, the pope, the Vicar of Christ, the chief shepherd of the universal Church. In choosing him, God gave him, as he gives to all of us, the necessary graces, insights, strengths, and circumstances both good and bad, to prepare him for his calling. For God, there are no coincidences.

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