A Message From Our Pastor

The German Shepherd

This past week the world watched as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI was laid to rest after passing away at the age of 95. He was buried in the papal grottoes beneath St. Peter's Basilica in the tomb in which his predecessor, St. John Paul II, was originally buried. (After his beatification, JP2 was moved upstairs and entombed under a side altar in the Basilica proper). In a sense, then, one could say that Pope Benedict XVI has followed John Paul II in life, and in death.

Actually, though, that was one the primary reasons he was elected by the College of Cardinals to succeed John Paul II as pope. The papacy of JP2 lasted 27 years, and the late Francis Cardinal George of Chicago reflected after the conclave in 2005 that the cardinals had discerned that, following the charismatic legacy of John Paul II, the Church needed someone who would honor the legacy of JP2 and be able to communicate fidelity, love and hope to the world. On April 19, 2005, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger was elected and took the name of Benedict XVI.

To those who knew him, Cardinal Ratzinger was a holy and humble man, a scholar, teacher, theologian, and also a bit of an introvert. He never sought to be in the limelight, and preferred small group conversations rather than large gatherings and audiences – a marked shift from his predecessor. For more than twenty years prior to his election, Cardinal Ratzinger was the head of the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, an office of the Vatican that made sure those people writing and teaching in the name of the Church were properly following Catholic doctrine. Because of this, some in the media who did not understand Catholic culture misunderstood Ratzinger and his role as head of CDF and were afraid he would aggressively stamp out any dissenting voices. They dubbed him, the German Shepherd, intending it to be a pejorative term. However, Catholics worldwide -- especially young people at World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany three months after his election -- quickly recognized the Pope's gentleness, compassion, and authenticity, and for the youth, the nickname of the German Shepherd became an endearing an apt description for the new Pope. He won their hearts as their shepherd.

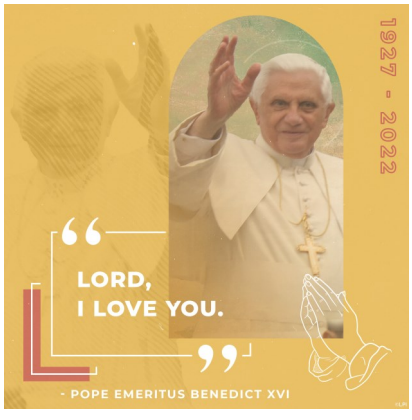
I was in Cologne for that World Youth Day and witnessed the shift in perception. The location had been planned for three years prior, and it turned out to be Pope Benedict's first major trip – and his first trip to his homeland as Pope. Within weeks of his election to papacy, registration doubled to 800,000. Even though some German media outlets were skeptical, nearly one million teens and young adult Catholics from Germany and all corners of the world flocked to greet their new spiritual shepherd. The enthusiasm was alive and palpable.

The theme for that WYD, "We have come to adore Him," was chosen because the Cathedral of Cologne (the Kölnerdom) housed the relics of the magi: Melchior, Kaspar, and Baltasar. And today, on Epiphany Sunday, we follow the three kings into the Nativity scene, adopting their raison d'etre as our mantra. We, too, have come to adore the Newborn King. At World Youth Day, Pope Benedict guided hundreds of thousands of young people in meditating on the meaning, depth, and beauty of their journey to adore Christ. For the three magi, it was adoring Jesus as a baby; for the attendees of WYD, it was adoring the same Jesus, only now today in Eucharistic Adoration. And the same is true for us.

Young people responded to the new pope's invitation, and Benedict taught them to see Christ hidden in the Eucharist, because then we can see Him in the Mass, in our brothers and sisters, and especially hidden in the poor. And hundreds of thousands of hearts, minds, and souls were opened to see, know, and love the beauty of God. Ultimately, that is the journey of life -- a journey that takes us from this life into the next.

While the Church today mourns the passing of her German Shepherd (Emeritus) on Epiphany Sunday, may we follow his example of inviting others to see Jesus, especially on Epiphany Sunday, together with the late Pope, we echo the call of the magi: "We have come to adore Him."

Rev. Steven Bauer



'Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.'

Excerpt from Pope Benedict's encyclical on Christian love, Deus Caritas Est (2005)