

Pope Benedict leaves legacy of faith and hope - and also love

In 1988, a group of about two dozen young Catholic journalists joined the first of what would become nearly annual “summer universities” sponsored by the International Network of Young Journalists, which was part of the International Catholic Union of the Press (known by its French initials UCIP). Bringing people from all parts of the world, except Western Europe, the journalists studied faith, history, culture, media and society in the context of Western Europe. Subsequent summer universities were held in other parts of the world. “Young journalists,” by church standards, were under age 35.

Yes, that was quite a few years ago, and I have outgrown the “young” tag. But as one of two members of the class from the United States, it gave me a chance to better understand how the church and its history are woven into everyday life.

Various guest professors from all different areas of expertise taught a day at a time for four weeks, at venues in Switzerland, France and Rome. In France, the head of the largest Catholic publishing house talked about the impact of Catholic publications in a “majority Catholic” country where fewer and fewer people practiced the faith. In Rome, the UCIP group got a private tour of the Vatican Museums, arriving in the Sistine Chapel during the ceiling’s restoration, arriving after hours, with no other museum visitors present.

One of the professors while the group was in session at the Gregorian University in Rome was a certain Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who at the time was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He was also working on a little project: as president of the Preparatory Commission for the Catechism of the Catholic Church, he coordinated the six years of work (1986-1992) that culminated in presentation of the new Catechism to the Pope John Paul II. Little did our group know that we had spent a day with the future pope. He was knowledgeable and seemed friendly, and open to our questions. It was an academic setting, and he was comfortable there, as he is first and foremost a theologian and teacher.

At the time of his election as pope, a bishop who had visited the Vatican many times

in roles at the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and as a diocesan bishop, wrote that of all the people he had encountered, Cardinal Ratzinger was the smartest man in the church, and possibly the smartest man he had ever met.

Over time, Cardinal Ratzinger had gotten the reputation as “the pope’s Doberman,” known for stern discipline of faith and practice. And when he was elected pope, many expected the same kind of continuation of his ministry. It was not the case.

As John Thavis writes in a just-released book, “The Vatican Diaries,” the pope immediately shed the image as the Vatican’s doctrinal watchdog. “Benedict had made it clear that he had a different agenda as pope, telling one aide, ‘It was easy to teach the doctrine. Helping a billion people live it is quite another thing.’”

Joseph Ratzinger, academic, became Benedict XVI, pastor. He never stopped preaching the Good News.

In a 2009 letter to the world’s bishops, he reflected on his main mission as the successor of Peter: “In our days, when in vast areas of the world the faith is in danger of dying out like a flame which no longer has fuel, the overriding priority is to make God present in this world and to show men and women the way to God.”

But he did not always light the crowds on fire. Perhaps it was his in his genes.

On a visit to Bavaria, in his homeland of Germany in 2006, one of the first public events of the week was an open-air Mass in Munich, at an airfield converted to a major gathering venue. As Benedict arrived by limousine and popemobile, the crowds cheered a bit when they saw him on-screen or when the popemobile passed their seating area. But this was not the sustained applause and adulation that often accompanied the arrival of John Paul II on his visits abroad.



Pope Benedict XVI is welcomed by children wearing traditional Bavarian outfits as Chancellor Angela Merkel, left, and Bavarian Minister-President Edmund Stoiber look on at Munich’s Franz Joseph Strauss International Airport Sept. 9, 2006. (CNS photo/Maurizio Brambatti, Pool via Reuters)

Encountering a nun carrying a sign proclaiming, “Benedict, We Love You,” two reporters from the US asked her about the phenomenon. Why was his reception so different from his predecessor? The Irish sister, who had served in more than 250 countries in mission work, said simply, “They’re Germans, dear. What did you expect?”

The German disposition aside, he did inspire. I had the opportunity to see this pope at several venues in Germany, at Nationals Park in Washington, D.C., and several times in Rome. He always brought things back to faith in Jesus Christ, whether it was his writings, or in the beatification ceremony for Blessed John Paul II, or at Christmas Mass.

On Christmas Day 2011, speaking in Italian to crowds gathered in St. Peter's Square for the Urbi et Orbi message "to the church and to the world," Benedict noted that Jesus Christ is the proof that God has heard his people's cry to "come and save us. ... Let us turn our gaze anew to the grotto of Bethlehem. The Child whom we contemplate is our salvation! He has brought to the world a universal message of reconciliation and peace. Let us open our hearts to Him; let us receive Him into our lives."

As Archbishop William E. Lori noted a few hours after the resignation was announced, "What shines through everything he writes about is the person of Christ. ... He plucks Christ out of history and brings him to the present."

On a personal note, I have this pope to thank for my marriage. While covering the papal visit to Germany in 2006, Ann Augheron, managing editor of the *Arlington Catholic Herald* in northern Virginia, and I began dating. We were married in 2008, and in 2012, while we were in Rome with Archbishop Lori for the reception of his pallium, she got a chance to personally thank the pope for his role in bringing us together. So while others talk about the pope's legacy in terms of faith and hope, we will always look on his legacy with love.

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