# Pope Benedict Xvi Biography



Pope Benedict XVI
Peter MacDiarmid/Getty Images.

## ☾ April 16, 1927 • Marktl am Inn, Bavaria, Germany

## Roman Catholic Pope

For twenty-seven years, from 1978 until his death in 2005, John Paul II (1920–2005) served as pope of the Roman Catholic Church, the Christian church consisting of bishops and priests with the pope as its head. (Christianity is a religion based on the teachings of Jesus Christ, a prophet who lived between approximately 6 BCE and 30 BCE . In 2005 there were approximately 1.2 billion Catholics worldwide.) The pope also serves as the head of Vatican City, the smallest independent nation in the world, located in the heart of Rome, Italy. During Pope John Paul's tenure his closest confidant and adviser was Joseph Ratzinger, a German cardinal (senior church official) who helped the pope create many of the Church's public documents and stances on important issues. When Pope John Paul II died on April 2, 2005, Ratzinger was considered a front-runner to replace him, and on April 19 he was elected almost unanimously by the 115 cardinals who were part of the voting process.

For years, because of his conservative views on such controversial topics as abortion (the deliberate ending of a pregnancy), Ratzinger was called "the Enforcer" by the press and members of the Church. Many feared that his call for a return to traditional values would divide believers in the Catholic faith. According to Andrew Sullivan of *Time* magazine, however, Ratzinger's supporters "viewed him as the Vatican's intellectual powerhouse, a man who rescued a drifting church from the sirens of modern life."

## Early life in Nazi Germany

Joseph Aloysius Ratzinger was born on April 16, 1927, in Marktl am Inn, a small village in the state of Bavaria, Germany. Bavaria is one of sixteen German states and is located on the southern border between Germany and Austria. Ratzinger's mother, Maria, was a cook; his father, Joseph, who was in his

fifties when his youngest child was born, served as a policeman for the state of Bavaria.

Ratzinger's childhood was a difficult one since he grew up during the era of Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) and Nazism. Hitler was the chancellor (leader) of Germany who came to power in 1933, when Ratzinger was just seven years old. He ruled brutally, and through the National Socialist Workers Party, known as the Nazi Party, he gained control of much of Europe during World War II (1939–45; war in which Great Britain, France,

"Dear brothers and sisters, after the great Pope John Paul II, the Cardinals have elected me, a simple and humble labourer in the vineyard of the Lord."

the Soviet Union, the United States, and their allies defeated Germany, Italy, and Japan). At the same time, Hitler created an oppressive atmosphere in Germany, targeting and exterminating specific groups such as people of the Jewish faith.

The Nazi regime was also hostile toward the Catholic Church. The Ratzingers were devout Catholics, and Joseph Sr. became an outspoken opponent of both Hitler and his government. As a result, he was demoted from state police officer to rural law enforcer. In 1937 Joseph Sr. retired to the town of Traunstein, located in southeastern Bavaria. It was there that Joseph Ratzinger and his older siblings Georg and Maria spent their formative years.

From the time he was very young, Ratzinger expressed his desire to become a Catholic priest. (A priest is a church official who serves at the local parish level.) The young Ratzinger began studying for the priesthood when he was only twelve years old, but his studies were cut short when he was forced to join the Hitler Youth in 1941, at age fourteen. Membership in the organization was mandatory for young German men. Ratzinger was a reluctant member and refused to attend meetings or participate in youth activities. However, he was required to do his part in the war effort. One of his jobs was to dig tank traps (deep ditches) along the Austrian border.

## Road to the priesthood

In 1943, when Ratzinger was sixteen, he was drafted into the German military. He was never involved in actual fighting; instead, as part of the anti-aircraft artillery corps he was assigned with guarding aircraft engine plants and various army bases. In 1945, along with other members of his unit, Ratzinger was sent for infantry (foot soldier) training, which prepared him to fight in actual combat. In mid-1945, however, just weeks before Germany surrendered, Ratzinger deserted (left without permission) the army and returned home to Traunstein. He was captured by American troops and was briefly held in a U.S. prisoner of war camp.

After the war ended Ratzinger resumed his studies. He and his brother Georg, who also intended to become a priest, entered Saint Michael Seminary in Traunstein in 1945. On June 29, 1951, after completing work at the University of Munich, both men were ordained, which means they officially became members of the priesthood. Ratzinger pursued advanced studies and received his Ph.D. in philosophy in 1953, with the intent of becoming a professor of philosophy and theology (study of religion). For the next twenty years he held posts at several universities, including the University of Bonn, the University of Tubingen, and the University of Regensburg.

From the start of his teaching career, Ratzinger earned a reputation as a learned scholar and a gifted lecturer. His classes were overflowing and, as one former student explained to Christopher Dickey of *Newsweek,* "He fascinated all of us with his wonderful, angelic voice, his clear language, his deep intellect and powerful faith." Ratzinger was also viewed with respect by his colleagues, and by the early 1960s he was already an influential theologian. In 1962 his status increased when he was asked to serve as a consultant during the Second Vatican Council. Sessions of the Vatican Council were held between 1962 and 1965, with the goal of modifying Church policies and structures so they would be more in line with changes in contemporary society.

At the end of the council sessions Ratzinger was known as a reformer, who felt that the Church was too bound by rules, and that control of the Church government was held too tightly by the Pope. He expressed these views in one of his most important works, *Introduction to Christianity,* which was published in 1968. Although Ratzinger was an advocate of structural reform, he also was a firm believer in adhering to traditional Catholic teachings. As a result, during the late 1960s he found himself at odds with radical Christian groups that were springing up in Germany. In particular, there was a call among German students for gay rights, which led to frequent uprisings at the University of Tubingen. Ratzinger denounced such beliefs, and he left Tubingen in 1969. Later that year he became the dean of theology at the University of Regensburg.

## Becomes trusted confidant

Through the mid-1970s Ratzinger's reputation continued to grow. In 1972 he cofounded the religious journal *Communio,* which eventually became one of the most influential publications devoted to Catholic philosophy. In March 1977 he took the first step on the ladder to the papacy when he was named Archbishop of Munich. Just three months later Ratzinger was made a cardinal by Pope Paul VI (1897–1978). In the Catholic Church hierarchy, the order of authority includes: priest at the local level; bishop (head of a larger territory, called a diocese); archbishop (elevated bishop who presides over a particularly important diocese); and cardinal (cardinals rank just below the pope and are appointed by the pope).

## From Servant of God to Patron Saint

In the Roman Catholic Church a saint is someone who lived an exceptionally holy life on Earth. After his death, this person acts as a mediator between the living and God. For example, Saint Christopher is the patron saint of travelers. According to legend, during the third century Christopher was a giant of a man who performed so many miracles that he converted a great number of people to Christianity. The Roman Emperor Decius (c. 201–251) was so enraged that he had Christopher tortured and killed. Christopher was made a saint, and today many people wear Saint Christopher medals as protection during trips.

The process of becoming a saint, which means being formally recognized, or canonized, by the Church is often quite lengthy. It can sometimes take years or even centuries. The individual's life is thoroughly scrutinized by Church officials and there must be extensive proof that he or she lived a truly holy life. Any person being considered for sainthood is given the title Servant of God. This title is usually not bestowed until someone has been dead for five years. However, when Pope John Paul II died in April 2, 2005, he was so enormously popular that during his funeral mourners called out "Saint now!" On May 14, in an unprecedented move, Benedict XVI ignored the five-year waiting period and began the process of canonization for John Paul II.

Once there is legitimate proof that an individual has performed truly heroic feats, such as being martyred (killed) for his beliefs, the title of Venerable is bestowed. The next step is to prove that an individual, while living, performed at least one miracle, which then earns them the title Blessed. When someone achieves this stage, they are beatified, which means they are recognized as a patron in a local region and are celebrated on a particular day of the calendar year known as a feast day. Once an individual is recognized universally by the Church he or she becomes a saint.

According to Jeff Israely of *Time* magazine, Pope John Paul II was considered to be head of a "saint-making factory." Between 1978 and 2005 he beatified 1,340 individuals and canonized 482 saints. In that twenty-seven year period he processed more saints than in the previous five centuries combined.

Two of the primary duties of a cardinal are to serve as an adviser to the pope on religious matters and to vote during papal elections, called a conclave. On August 6, 1978, when Pope Paul VI died, Ratzinger participated in his first conclave, which elected John Paul I (1912–1978). John Paul I served as pope for only thirty-three days and then died of a heart attack—one of the shortest papacies in history. In October 1978, the conclave of cardinals elected John Paul II, who presided over the Catholic Church for over twenty-five years. During that time Ratzinger became the pope's special ally and trusted confidant. The two had known each other since their days on the Second Vatican Council and they both shared the same conservative religious views.

In 1981 Pope John Paul II called Ratzinger to Rome to serve as prefect (head) of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is the main body in the Church that makes decisions on Catholic teachings and beliefs. Throughout his tenure Ratzinger became a spokesman for maintaining conservative religious beliefs. For example, he was an opponent of abortion, sex outside of marriage, gay rights, and any type of birth control. At one point, according to *People,* he even denounced rock music as a "vehicle of antireligion." When theologians or church officials took a more open view, Ratzinger frequently suspended or fired them. As a result, he became known as the Enforcer.

In the early 1990s Ratzinger suffered a stroke (a blockage of blood to the brain), which affected his eyesight and weakened his heart. Because of his health problems he tried to resign from his post at least twice, but both times Pope John Paul II refused his resignation. Ratzinger remained in Rome partly because of his extreme devotion to John Paul II, and, as George Weigel of *Newsweek* commented, he was a man "who long ago handed his life over to the will of God.

## Conclave of 2005

In 1998 Pope John Paul II named Ratzinger vice-dean of the College of Cardinals; he was appointed dean in 2002. The College of Cardinals is composed of all the cardinals in the Catholic Church. The number of cardinals at any given time depends on the pope's discretion; in 2005 there were 183. According to religious commentators John Paul II had strategic motives for placing his adviser in such an important position. Knowing that his health was failing, the pope wanted to be sure that his successor would be someone who shared his traditional beliefs. Even if Ratzinger was not elected, he would be key in the decision-making process.

In February 2005, eighty-four-year-old Pope John Paul II, who had been ill for several years, was hospitalized at least twice. In March the press reported that he was near death, and on April 2, 2005, the Vatican officially announced that Pope John Paul II had died. Millions kept vigil outside his apartment in

the Vatican, and Catholics worldwide mourned the loss of the pope who had been particularly loved by followers throughout his life.

In the days following John Paul II's death, Ratzinger was in the public eye a great deal. He presided over the pope's funeral and made himself available to all the cardinals who were gathering in Rome for the papal conclave. Fluent in several languages, he spoke to them in Spanish, German, French, English, and Italian. He also led the meetings leading up to the official papal election. As one Vatican expert commented to Jeff Israely of *Time,* "Ratzinger seems to have grabbed the ball and run with it for two weeks."

On April 18, 2005, the 117 cardinals who were eligible to vote (those under the age of eighty) met to decide on the next pope. During the first round of ballots, Ratzinger emerged as the front-runner but did not take a majority of votes. The indecision was announced to the world via black smoke rising from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel, which is the chapel located in the Vatican palace. On April 19, Ratzinger inched closer to becoming pope during the second and third rounds of voting. That evening, after the fourth round of ballots was counted, he had reached 95 out of 117 votes. Only 77 were required to ensure him the papacy. At 6:00 PM white smoke billowed out of the chimney of the chapel and the bells of St. Peter's Basilica (a church in Rome) rang out confirming that a new pope was officially in place.



**Pope Benedict XVI surrounds himself with local children on a visit to Introd, Italy.**
Giuseppe Cacace/Getty Images.

## Filling the pope's shoes

Although it is not required, it is customary for popes to change names upon taking office. Immediately after the votes were confirmed, Jorge Cardinal Arturo Medina Estevez, who was charged with introducing the new pope, asked Ratzinger what name he would assume. According to the press he did not hesitate and replied "Benedict XVI." One Vatican expert, who spoke with Jeff Israely, commented, "In the past there's been a wait while the new Pope pondered the question for 10 minutes or so. Not so this time. Ratzinger...was prepared." Later in April, during one of his first public appearances, the new pope explained his name choice. He acknowledged Pope Benedict XV (1854–1922), who reigned during the

turbulent years of World War I (1914–18; war in which Great Britain, France, the United States, and their allies defeated Germany, Austria-Hungary, and their allies), and Saint Benedict of Norcia (c. 480–543), one of the patron saints of Europe.

In the months following his inauguration, many seemed divided over what they could expect during the reign of the latest Pope Benedict. Until his last years, Pope John Paul II was an extremely dynamic man, and despite his conservative views, he was beloved by people both inside and outside the Catholic Church. Prior to becoming pope, Ratzinger was known for possessing a warm sense of humor, but he was also a studious man who protected his privacy. Since assuming the role of pope he made it a priority to appear frequently in the press and to interact regularly with the public. In fact, he tended to travel in an open popemobile (a specially designed papal car) so that he could visit more freely.

The greatest concern remained whether or not his ultra-conservative position would divide the over one billion Catholics who lived around the world, many of whom were Christian in their beliefs, but who wanted to see Church teachings reflect the ever-changing, more-accepting society. During several early public statements, the new pope made it clear that he remained steadfast in his convictions and that change would not be forthcoming. In May 2005 he condemned a Spanish law that would allow for gay adoptions, and in a conference held in Rome in June he condemned same-sex marriages and abortion. Benedict XVI had many supporters. The cardinals who elected him considered him to be a capable manager and leader. And, according to one American theology student who spoke with Jay Tolson of *U.S. News … World Report,* the German pope is just what the Church needed: "He will be clear and forceful, and he will bring integrity to the church. There is nothing more attractive than a faith that is strong."

## For More Information

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