

This Day in History... April 24, 2005

Inauguration of Pope Benedict XVI

On April 24, 2005, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was inaugurated as Pope Benedict XVI, becoming the 265th Pope of the Catholic Church before a crowd of more than 300,000 in St. Peter's Square. The 78-year-old German theologian — once nicknamed “God's Rottweiler” for his doctrinal rigor — surprised the world eight years later by becoming the first pope to resign in nearly 600 years.

Joseph Alois Ratzinger was born April 16, 1927, in Marktl am Inn, Bavaria, Germany, and was baptized the same day. When Joseph was five years old, he joined a group of children welcoming the Cardinal Archbishop of Munich to his town. So enamored was he with the Cardinal's vibrant robes that he declared his wish that day to become a cardinal himself. His family moved several times during his childhood due to his father's anti-Nazi activities, making them a regular target of Hitler's regime.

In 1943, at 16, Joseph was drafted into the German anti-aircraft corps while still studying in seminary. He later trained in the German infantry but was spared active service due to illness. He eventually left the military and returned home to find American troops had set up headquarters in the family house. He spent the next few months in a POW camp until the war ended in the summer of 1945.

That fall, Joseph and his brother Georg entered Saint Michael Seminary. Both brothers were ordained on June 29, 1951. Of that moment, Joseph recalled: “at the moment the elderly Archbishop laid his hands on me, a little bird — perhaps a lark — flew up from the altar in the high cathedral and trilled a little joyful song.”

Joseph became a professor at Freising College in 1958 and went on to teach at the Universities of Bonn, Münster, Tübingen, and Regensburg. At Regensburg, he co-founded the theological journal *Communio* in 1972, which is still published today in 17 languages. On March 24, 1977, he was appointed Archbishop of Munich and Freising. Pope Paul VI named him a Cardinal that June, and in November 1981, Pope John Paul II appointed him Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

As Pope John Paul II's health declined in early 2005, Ratzinger emerged as the most likely successor. He delivered a moving homily at John Paul II's funeral mass on April 8, 2005. Eleven days later, the College of Cardinals elected him pope. Before the election, he had prayed: “*Do not do this to me! You have younger and better people at your disposal.*” A fellow cardinal encouraged him by pointing back to his own homily — reminding him that John Paul II had always followed the Lord's call, even to places he never wished to go.

He took the name Benedict — Latin for “the blessed” — honoring both Pope Benedict XV and St. Benedict of Nursia. At his inauguration on April 24, he received the pallium, a wool band worn around the neck, and the Ring of the Fisherman, both symbols of the papal office. Within a month, he waived the usual five-year waiting period to begin the beatification process for John Paul II, citing “exceptional circumstances.”

Over nearly eight years, Benedict carried out 24 apostolic visits abroad, wrote three encyclicals, proclaimed 45 saints and 855 blessed, and created 84 cardinals. His first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (“God Is Love”), issued in 2005, was widely praised, and his three-volume series *Jesus of Nazareth* became an international bestseller.

His resignation took effect on February 28, 2013 — making him the first pope to relinquish the office since Gregory XII in 1415 — citing a “lack of strength of mind and body” due to advanced age. He moved into the Mater Ecclesiae Monastery in the Vatican Gardens on May 2, 2013, where he spent his retirement in prayer and study. On his only post-retirement trip outside Italy, he flew to Germany in June 2020 to visit his ailing 96-year-old brother Georg, who died shortly after. Pope Benedict XVI died on December 31, 2022, at the age of 95, at the Mater Ecclesiae Monastery. Around 195,000 mourners paid their respects as he lay in state in St. Peter's Basilica, and his funeral on January 5, 2023 — presided over by Pope Francis — was attended by approximately 50,000 people.



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