

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,  
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
FOR THE MASS IN SUFFRAGE FOR POPE EMERITUS BENEDICT XVI  
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE  
WASHINGTON, D.C.  
JANUARY 5, 2023**

Dear brother Bishops and Priests,  
Dear distinguished authorities and members of the diplomatic corps,  
Dear friends in Christ,

It is my sad duty, as the Apostolic Nuncio to the United States of America, to offer this Mass in suffrage for the late Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, who served as Bishop of Rome and Supreme Pontiff from 2005 to 2013. But our sadness today is also tinged with fond recollection and gratitude to God for the life and ministry of this extraordinary pastor, theologian, author, bishop and Christian.

The funeral Mass, or the memorial Mass for the dead, is always, first and foremost, a prayer to Almighty God, a cry for mercy, an act of accompaniment of the faithful departed. We accompany them and sustain them with our prayers and especially by the offering of the greatest prayer. This is our first duty today: to pray for Pope Benedict, to accompany him with this great prayer of the Mass, as he journeys towards eternity.

When a figure such as Pope Benedict dies, we cannot help reflecting on his life, on his service to the Church, on the impact he has had upon the Church and the world and on the legacy he leaves after him. Gathered in this sanctuary, we cannot but recall also, with affection and fondness, the manner in which he touched the people of these United States, in particular during his Apostolic Visit of 2008, which included an important stage in this very Basilica.

There are many aspects of the life of Pope Benedict XVI: there is his childhood in Bavaria, lived in a strong Catholic home, but also under the ghastly shadow of war; there are his studies in theology, where he consigned theses both on the notion of the People of God in St Augustine and on the theology of history in St Bonaventure; there is his long tenure as a professor of theology, during which he published on themes of Christology, biblical theology, patrology, liturgy, eschatology and so much more. You know that the *Opera Omnia* of Pope Benedict fill 16 volumes, not all of which have yet been published.

There is his service as a *Peritus* of the Second Vatican Council, which so shaped his subsequent theological reflection. There is too his “new” vocation as a diocesan bishop in Munich; and subsequently his service as the Prefect of the then Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. And finally, there is his ministry as the Bishop of Rome and his final years as the Emeritus of that See.

But what can we say about this variegated trajectory; what can it teach us for our own lives of faith? The Gospel of today’s Mass directs us to an answer. It was the same Gospel read at Pope Benedict’s Mass of Inauguration on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2005. “Peter, do you love me”; “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” The life of Pope Benedict, it seems to me, was characterized throughout by the same answer of Joseph

Ratzinger: “Yes Lord, you know that I love you!”. It was a life characterized by his search for the Face of the living God; by his desire to put God at the center of things and to bring others to God. It is that mission to which his legacy calls us today.

As a theologian, he published many extensive works of scholarship. It surprised some, perhaps, that as Pope, he seemed more taciturn. He published only three, rather short, encyclical letters, for example. We might say that he published a fourth, together with Pope Francis. And to what were these encyclicals devoted? To the theological virtues; in other words, to the fundamental things. His first was *Deus Caritas est* – Love; his second *Spe salvi* – Hope; his third returned to Love, as necessarily rooted in the truth: *Caritas in veritate* and that fourth to which I alluded, which Pope Francis wished to publish as his first encyclical, but which had been in preparation by Pope Benedict: *Lumen fidei* – Faith.

Faith, Hope and Love are the theological virtues; in other words, they relate principally to God, as he has revealed Himself to us.

The desire to place God at the center and to seek His Will profoundly marked Pope Benedict’s life. During the homily for the inauguration of his pontificate, on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2005, Pope Benedict revealed his intentions, in this very respect, and I quote:

*My real program of governance is not to do my own will, not to pursue my own ideas, but to listen, together with the whole Church, to the word and the will of the Lord, to be guided by Him, so that He himself will lead the Church at this hour of our history.*

(Homily for Mass of Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry, 24 April 2013.)

Throughout the course of his pontificate, he continued in this direction: focusing on the things of God; and calling us to be attentive to them. In that same inauguration homily, he put this path before us all, when he said:

*... the purpose of our lives is to reveal God to men. And only where God is seen does life truly begin. Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is. We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary. There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. (Ibid.)*

Such a declaration was the expression of the man himself, who understood his own life and vocation in this sense. Even his choice of name – Benedict – references St Benedict of Norcia, the founder of monasticism in the West, whose great Rule is radically centered on God.

Together with the terse encyclicals, Pope Benedict determined to dedicate a part of his energies as Pope to publishing his “Jesus of Nazareth” trilogy. In the Foreword to the first published volume, he calls the books: “an expression of my personal search for the face of the Lord” (Forward, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 2007).

The legacy of his pontificate is to invite us to the same essential research. A phrase from his first encyclical letter, *Deus caritas est*, sums it up beautifully:

*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.*

(Encyclical Letter, *Deus caritas est*, 1.)

It is very significant that Pope Francis, in his programmatic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (n. 7), tells us that he never tires of repeating this lovely expression of Benedict XVI. Indeed, Pope Francis applies this insight of Benedict to the work of evangelization. For Pope Francis, as for Benedict XVI, the faith is not an idea or an ideology, but an encounter with Christ.

So, my dear friends, as we come to mourn the passing of Benedict XVI, we join in prayer with the Holy Father Pope Francis, who celebrated the funeral Mass today in Rome. And we recognize in the pontificate of Pope Benedict a gift to the entire Church, calling each of us back to the fundamental truths, wherein we find our life and joy.

In his book-length interview of 1997, *Salt of the Earth*, the then Cardinal Ratzinger put his finger on the essential thing of which we have such need today, and I quote:

*We have a new need for that primordial trust which ultimately only faith can give: that the world is basically good, that God is there and is good. That it is good to live and be a human being. This results, then, in the courage to rejoice, which in turn becomes a commitment to making sure that other people too, can rejoice and receive good news.*

Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth: Christianity and the Catholic church at the end of the Millennium*, Ignatius Press 1997, p. 37.)

May Pope Benedict now know the eternal rejoicing that is found only before God's face, in the company of the saints. And may we profit from the lessons his life has imparted: the centrality of the things of God, which give direction to our lives and explain our destiny; and which permit us to say, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you".