

Pope Benedict XVI and China

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One cloudy day in March 1993, a slightly built, unassuming middle-aged cleric walked into my office in the old venue of the Holy Spirit Study Centre, located above the Seminary Library, and said: “Good afternoon, Father.” I responded: “Good afternoon, your Eminence.” I recognized Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger immediately. I had previously heard that the Cardinal was in Hong Kong to give an address to a meeting of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences. We shook hands, and the visitor then turned and walked out of the office.

Our encounter could not have taken more than five seconds. But what impressed me was Cardinal’s Ratzinger’s friendliness and approachability. Here was definitely a person who did not stand on ceremony. He had come into my office to meet me; I was not called out to our general meeting room to meet him. The Chinese phrase, “pingyi jinren” (amiable and easy to approach) comes to mind to describe the personality of our new Holy Father. I am sure this character trait will make its presence felt in all the Holy Father’s dealings with others.

“Amiable and approachable” was certainly not the picture of Cardinal Ratzinger one got from reading the world’s media during his 24-year tenure as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a post to which Pope John Paul II appointed him on November 25, 1981. During the Cardinal’s tenure, his Congregation was responsible for reining in many a Catholic theologian who was seen to deviate from traditional Catholic doctrine. But perhaps that job called for strictness, and an adherence to orthodoxy, since it dealt with matters concerning the content of the Catholic faith.



Pope Benedict XVI, 265th Pope of the Roman Catholic Church

The new Holy Father's background is now well known. Joseph Ratzinger was born on April 16, 1927 in Marktl am Inn, Germany. He grew up in Traunstein, a small town near the Austrian border, where his father, a police officer, was stationed. After the Second World War in 1945, young Joseph, then 18 years of age, entered St. Michael's Seminary in Traunstein. From 1946 to 1951, Joseph studied philosophy and theology at the University of Munich. On June 29, 1951, he was ordained a priest by Cardinal von Faulhaber of Munich in the Cathedral of Freising, along with

his brother Georg. In 1953, Father Ratzinger obtained a doctorate in theology from the University of Munich with a thesis on St. Augustine's doctrine of the Church.

After qualifying as a university professor in 1957, Father Ratzinger taught theology at several schools and universities, including Tübingen (1966-69) and Regensburg (1969-77). From 1962 to 1965, Father Ratzinger attended all four sessions of the Second Vatican Council as the chief theological advisor of Cardinal Josef Frings, Archbishop of Cologne. He later described this experience as a time of great theological growth for himself.

On March 24, 1977, Pope Paul VI appointed Father Ratzinger Archbishop of Munich and Freising. He was consecrated bishop on May 28, 1977. Pope Paul then made him a Cardinal during the consistory of June 27, 1977. As noted above, in November 1981, Pope John Paul II appointed Cardinal Ratzinger Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Cardinal Ratzinger resigned from the sees of Munich and Freising on February 15, 1982, and devoted the next 23 years of his life to service at the Vatican. While in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger played a leading role in the six years' work of drafting the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1986-1992).

As Dean of the College of Cardinals, a post to which Pope John Paul II appointed Cardinal Ratzinger in November 2002, he oversaw the arrangements for the late Pope's funeral after his death on April 2, 2005. On Friday April 8, 2005, Cardinal Ratzinger presided at Pope John Paul's funeral Mass in St. Peter's Square, which was attended by over 200 of the world's religious and political leaders, and which was beamed by satellite to a worldwide audience. On Tuesday April 19, 2005, the second day of the conclave, Cardinal Ratzinger's fellow Cardinals elected him the 265th Pope of the Roman Catholic Church. The new Pope chose the name Benedict XVI.

Why did he choose the name Benedict to mark his pontificate? On April 27, at his first general audience in St. Peter's Square, Pope Benedict addressed this question: "I wish to call myself Benedict

XVI to be united ideally with the venerated Pope Benedict XV, who led the Church in the troubled time of World War I. He was a courageous prophet of peace, who did his utmost from the beginning to avoid the tragedy of war, and then to limit its unfortunate consequences. Following his footsteps, I wish to put my ministry at the service of reconciliation and harmony among men and nations.” Secondly, he chose the name Benedict in honor of the great founder of Western monasticism and co-patron of Europe, along with Saints Cyril and Methodius. Quoting this line from the Rule of St. Benedict, “Prefer absolutely nothing to Christ,” the new Holy Father then went on to declare: “At the beginning of my service as Successor of Peter, I pray to St. Benedict to help us to hold firmly to the centrality of Christ in our lives.” (Zenit.org, April 27, 2005)

What does the new Holy Father see as the priorities or policies of his pontificate? On April 20, in his first address to the Cardinals who on the previous day had elected him Pope, Benedict XVI emphasized Christian unity. “Full visible Christian unity will be the ‘primary commitment’ of my Petrine ministry,” he told them. In a speech on April 25, Pope Benedict thanked the representatives of the non-Catholic Christian Churches and other religions for attending his inauguration ceremony. He then urged the other Christian Churches to continue to seek the unity that Jesus prayed (*ut unum sint* – that all may be one) would exist among His disciples. To the Muslims, Benedict expressed appreciation for the growth of dialogue and the building of bridges between the two communities.

Another indication of the Holy Father’s attitude towards other nations can be seen from his address, on May 12, to the over 170 diplomats from other nations, who are accredited to the Holy See. After greeting these representatives of nations with whom the Holy See already has diplomatic relations, Pope Benedict said: “I think also of those nations with which the Holy See does not yet have diplomatic relations. Some among them participated in the ceremonies marking the death of my predecessor and my election to

the See of Peter. Appreciating such gestures, I desire to express my gratitude to them today, and to address a greeting of respect to the civil authorities of these countries. I would like to see them sooner or later represented at the Apostolic See.” (Discourse to the Ambassadors of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, May 12, 2005, www.vatican.va)

When the Holy Father mentioned countries not yet having diplomatic relations with the Holy See, one thinks immediately of China. What comes across from a brief reading of Pope Benedict’s first speeches is his openness towards other Christian communities, other religions and other nations, which may have beliefs different from the Catholic Church.

The openness, then, seems to exist for an improvement in Vatican-China relations. No doubt, negotiations must take place first to deal with such difficult questions as the appointment of bishops in the Chinese Catholic Church, the freedom of communication between the Holy See and the bishops, freedom of travel for Chinese bishops to make their *ad limina* visits to Rome, the appointment of Chinese Cardinals, and freedom for Chinese bishops to meet and handle Chinese Church matters themselves without interference from outside bodies, political or otherwise. It goes without saying, of course, that all underground bishops and priests, now undergoing various kinds of detention, should be released, and be allowed to take up their pastoral ministry again.

Indeed, in regard to relations between the Vatican and other States, freedom of religion, and the varying degrees of its presence or absence in certain States, seems to be a more important issue than diplomatic relations as such. Pope Benedict XVI alluded to this towards the end of his May 12 speech to the diplomats: “The Catholic Church asks no privileges for herself, but only the legitimate conditions of freedom to carry out her mission.”

We pray that the Holy Spirit of Pentecost will guide Pope Benedict XVI throughout his pontificate, as he deals with the many questions facing the Universal Catholic Church, one of which is relations with China.