Opinion
NCR Voices



Pope Benedict XVI greets the world from St. Peter's Basilica after his election April 29, 2005. (CNS/Reuters)



by Tom Roberts

View Author Profile
troberts@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

May 20, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint



(NCR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

The odds-makers likely had an easier time 20 years ago, when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, long a loyal servant of Pope John Paul II and dean of the college of cardinals, stepped onto the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square as new Pope Benedict XVI.

It was the first conclave NCR would cover in the digital age, with material available on our relatively new website. The meeting of ancient tradition with digital modernity — then a reality much slower and glitch-prone than the technology of today — had about it a fresher sense of adventure and risk. Since Benedict as a cardinal had exercised enormous influence and power as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, there was far less suspense in the air about what kind of papacy we could expect.

Related: HABEMUS PAPAM: Leo XIV is 1st US pope chosen to lead Catholic Church

A previously print-only weekly was filing stories and columns daily by our then-Vatican correspondent John Allen, Sr. Joan Chittister, who was in Rome for the occasion, photos by then-publisher Sr. Rita Larivee and by a very talented freelancer

named Stacy Meichtry, who wrote the initial report of the election below. You might know his byline today. He now is Paris bureau chief for The Wall Street Journal and was recently back in Rome where he co-wrote WSJ's roundup of the Vatican's recent financial scandals as well as the conclave that elected Pope Leo XIV.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger elected Pope Benedict XVI

April 19, 2005

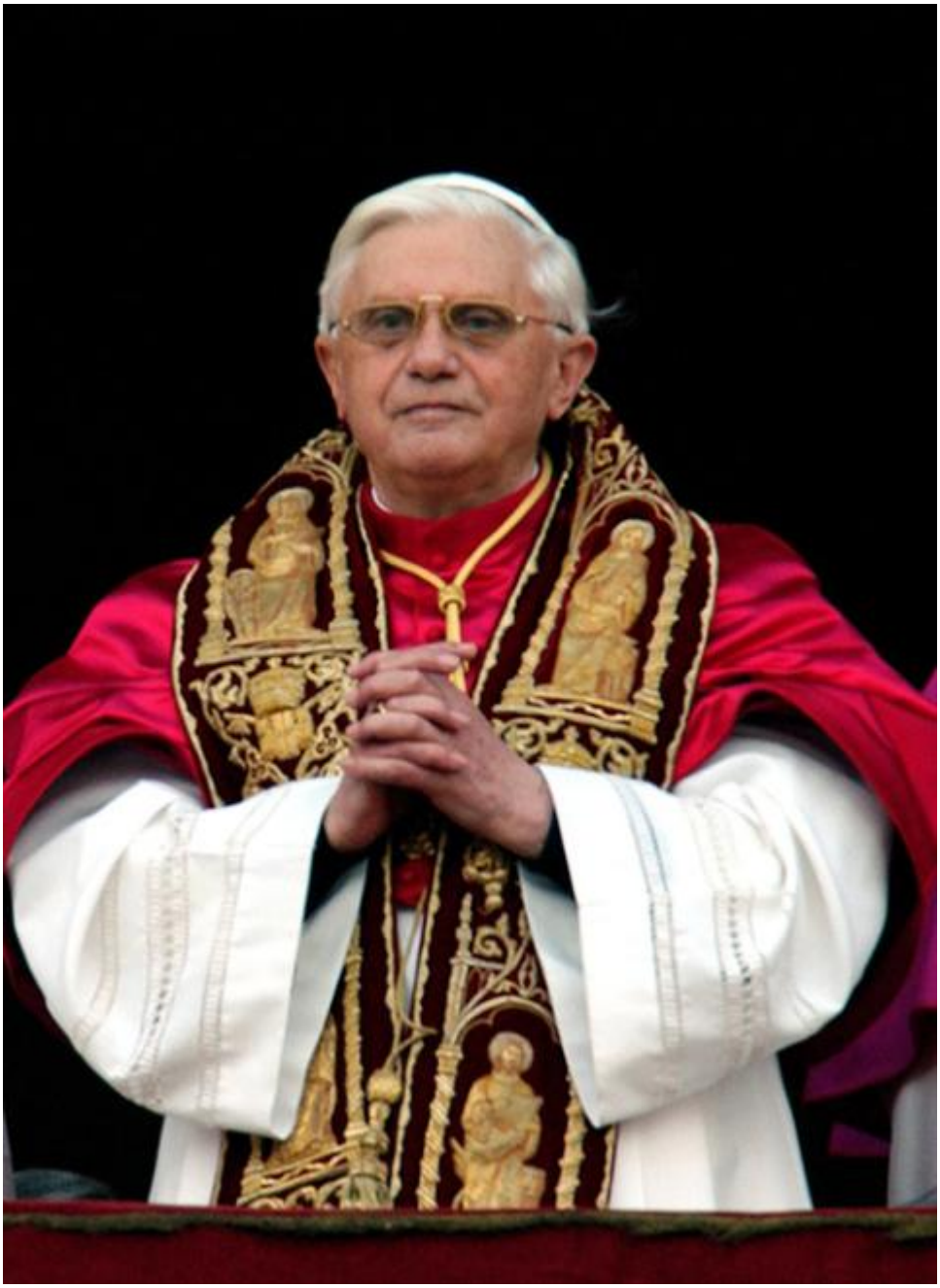
By Stacy Meichtry

ROME — Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected pope of the Roman Catholic Church Tuesday after one of the briefest conclaves in modern history, suggesting the church will begin the third millennium with a strong embrace of strict doctrine.

The best-known cardinal in the world for his decades of service to John Paul II as his top theological advisor and for his pre-conclave prominence as dean of the College of Cardinals, Ratzinger took the name of Benedict XVI.

"Dear brothers and sisters. After the great Pope John Paul II, the Cardinals have elected me, a simple and humble worker in the vineyard of the lord," Ratzinger told the thousands of faithful after appearing at the curtained balcony of St. Peter's Basilica.

Ratzinger's election came on the fourth ballot of the conclave of 115 cardinals that began Monday evening.



With folded hands, Pope Benedict XVI stands on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica April 19, 2005, before a crowd of nearly 100,000 people. (CNS/Catholic Press Photo/Alessia Giuliani)

The first indication of Ratzinger's election came in the form of gray smoke that streamed from the Sistine Chapel's metal smokestack at 5:50 p.m., dispersing in steady winds. The mixed smoke signal initially created confusion in the square as crowds began to rush down Via della Conciliazione. But 10 minutes later the ambiguity melted away at the sound of the tolling "campanone" -- St. Peter's main

bell, the other sign of papal election that Vatican officials added to the colored smoke as an auxiliary measure.

Thousands had flooded the square by the time the Senior Deacon of the College of Cardinals, Jorge Medina Estevez, appeared at the basilica balcony to announce "*Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum; habemus Papam*," Latin for "I announce a great joy to you; we have a pope!"

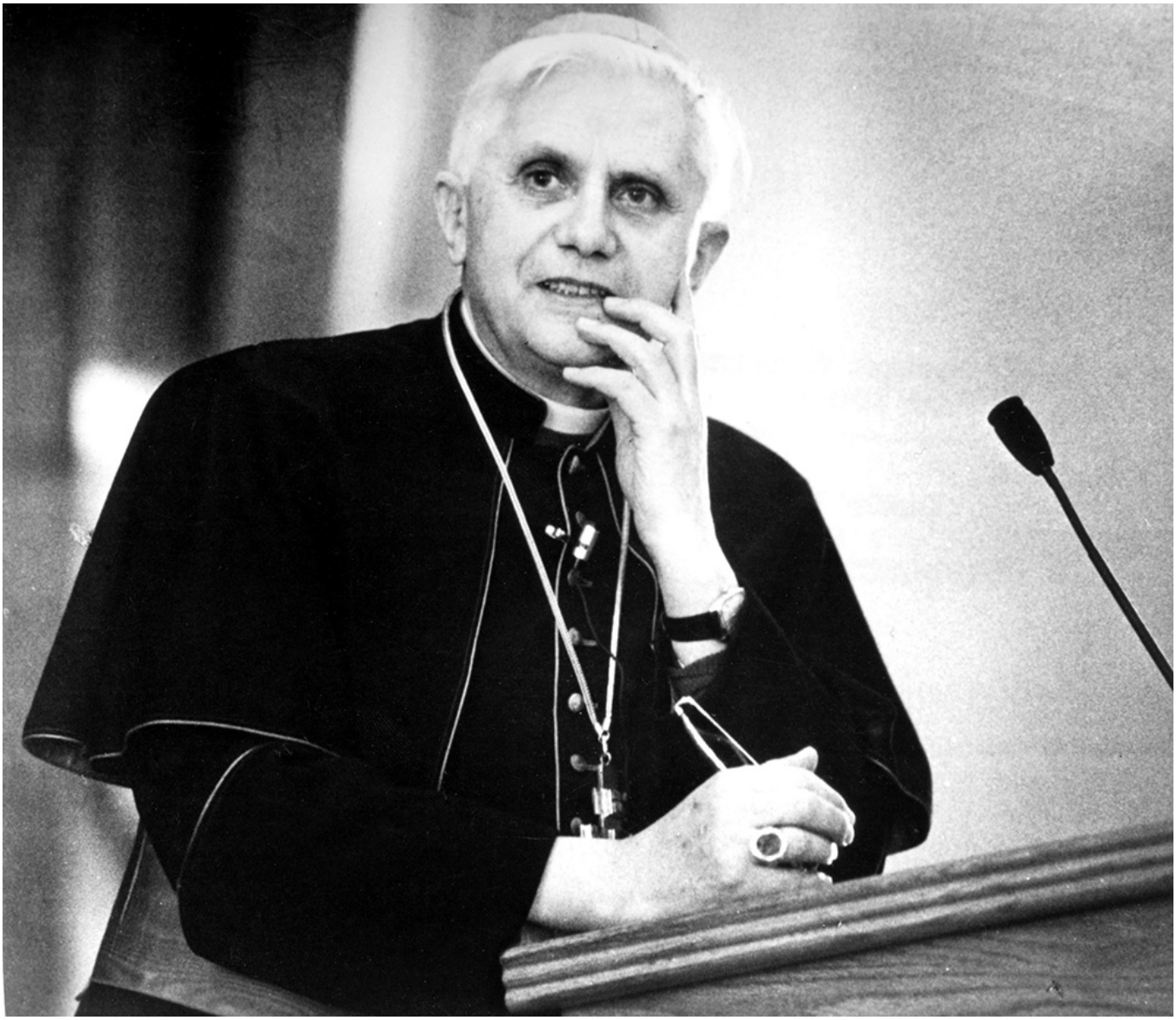
Ratzinger appeared moments later, clasping his hands and raising them to his head in a gesture of victory.

"The fact that the lord can work and act even with insufficient means consoles me, and above all I entrust myself to your prayers," the new pope said.

With a pair of glasses perched on his nose and his freshly minted white cap blending into his snowy hair, the 78 year-old pope pronounced the traditional *urbi et orbi* blessing as the sun began to set behind St. Peter's massive dome.

Some members of the crowd chanted "Benedict! Benedict!" Applause echoed through the square.

As a young priest, Ratzinger was on the progressive side of theological debates, and served at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) as a *peritus* for reform-minded Cardinal Josef Frings of Cologne, Germany. After the student revolutions of 1968, however, Ratzinger shifted to the right. In the Vatican, he has been the driving force behind crackdowns on liberation theology, religious pluralism, challenges to traditional moral teachings on issues such as homosexuality, and dissent on issues such as women's ordination.



Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, gives a lecture in New York in January 1988. He died Dec. 31, 2022, at the age of 95 in his residence at the Vatican. (OSV News photo/KNA)

This combative stance was on display Monday when Ratzinger delivered a forceful defense of church teaching during the *Pro Eligendo* Mass, hours before the cardinals entered the Sistine Chapel to begin the conclave.

"We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires," he told the cardinals, urging them to promote a "maturity of Christ" to protect the church from modern influence.

Ratzinger struck a similar note at an international conference on church music in 1986 when he described rock music as a "vehicle of anti-religion.''

The conclave's brevity surprised some commentators who doubted whether the 115 voting cardinals from 5 different continents could forge a consensus early on.

Italian Cardinal Silvano Piovanelli, 81, was on Italian state-television hours before Ratzinger's election. Asked if he thought the conclave was nearing an end, he said: "I don't think so." He then added: "By now in conclaves we're getting used to surprises."

While Ratzinger's election surprised some, his selection was not entirely unexpected. The German emerged as a front-runner for the church's top job last week as speculation swirled through Rome that the conservative theologian was gaining support among cardinals aiming for doctrinal continuity with John Paul II. His election makes him the first German pontiff in over 1000 years. The last Germanic pope was Victor II, who led the Church from 1055-1057.



Pope Benedict XVI greets the world from St. Peter's Basilica after his election April 29, 2005. (CNS/Reuters)

Ratzinger's decision to take the name of Benedict XVI could be based on a number of historical factors. St. Benedict is the patron saint of Europe, a continent that has seen a sharp decline in church attendance under John Paul II. Ratzinger left Rome the night of before John Paul died to attend an award ceremony at a Benedictine monastery in Subiaco, Italy, where he was given the "St. Benedict Prize for the Promotion of Life and Family in Europe."

Benedict XV, meanwhile, was the pope that presided over the church during World War I and authored the 1914 encyclical *Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum*, which called a halt to infighting in the church.

In recent years, Ratzinger has expressed a need to reform the Church from the inside out. In a meditation Ratzinger prepared for the Way of the Cross at the Coliseum ceremony in March, he lashed out at the clergy and likened the church to a sinking ship.

"How much filth there is in the church, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to (Christ)," he wrote.

"Lord, your church often seems like a boat about to sink, a boat taking in water on every side.

Advertisement

The boat metaphor reemerged during Monday's *Pro Eligendo* Mass, when Ratzinger described the Church as as a "little boat of Christian thought" tossed by waves of "extreme" schools of modern thought, which he identified as Marxism, liberalism, libertinism, collectivism and "radical individualism." Other dangers to the faith included "a vague religious mysticism," "new sects," and materialism.

The hard-line theologian began his apostolate career in 1977 when he was made archbishop of Munich and Freising. Three months later, Pope Paul VI elevated him to cardinal.

Ratzinger was invited to Rome in 1980 to head the Congregation for Catholic Education. He declined the invitation, saying he was not ready to leave Munich. A year later, Ratzinger arrived in Rome to take the reins of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Speaking from the White House, President George W. Bush described the newly elected pope a "man of great wisdom and knowledge" and a "man who serves the Lord."

French President Jacques Chirac said France "will pursue the trusting dialogue that it has always had with the Holy See, in particular in the common fights for peace,

justice, solidarity and the dignity of man."

"What an enormous privilege it was to be a part of his election," Cardinal Theodore McCarrick said in a statement following the conclave. "Since I've known Cardinal Ratzinger for many years, I was privileged to be able to greet an old friend as our new Holy Father."

"We got our man!" John Paul Sonnen, 26, of Minneapolis, yelled. Upon learning of the smoke signal, Sonnen had stormed St. Peter's Square carrying at 10-foot staff rigged with two flags—that of the Holy See and the Star Spangled Banner. He waved them manically when Ratzinger stepped onto the balcony, wearing an embroidered crimson mantle. "I'm just carrying the torch," he said.

Khemais Ali, a Tunisian in St. Peter's Square said: "It will be tough with Ratzinger. He's not only German--he's Bavarian," Ali said, expressing concern over Ratzinger's reputation as a rigorous doctrinaire. "In the 21st century, we can't continue to keep people divided over the way they practice religion."

Cristina Gianmetiasto, a communications major at Rome's La Sapienza University, hadn't made up her mind yet. "I don't care that he's not Italian," she said. "But I hear he's a bit of a reactionary, and this scares me."

The pope spent his first night as the 265 pontiff dining with his fellow cardinals at the Casa Santa Marta, the Vatican hotel.

This story appears in the **NCR at 60 years** feature series. View the full series.
A version of this story appeared in the **May 23-June 5, 2025** print issue under the headline: The first conclave NCR covered in a digital age.