



FAITH-BASED

“God’s Rottweiler”

The life and death of Pope Benedict XVI.

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Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI seen at St Peter’s basilica in the Vatican in 2015. Vincenzo Pinto/Getty Images

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, the first pope to step down from the position in six centuries, has died at age 95, the Vatican announced Saturday.

The news marks the first time in centuries that the death of the pope will be met with simple mourning, rather than intrigue and drama, as it will not require the election of a new pope. Given the unprecedented nature of the situation, it’s not yet clear what the full protocol surrounding Benedict’s death and funeral will be, though the Vatican has said his

body will be laid in St. Peter's Basilica on Monday for the public to pay respects. The current pope, Francis, will preside over Benedict's funeral in St. Peter's Square on Thursday. According to the Associated Press, the Vatican invited only official delegations from Italy and Germany to the ceremony, making it clear that it will not treat the event as a full papal funeral.

Benedict XVI, born Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger, was the head of the Catholic Church for just eight years, from 2005 to 2013, and will likely be remembered more for the ending of his papacy than any actions he took within it. Unlike his predecessor, St. John Paul II, a diplomat and charismatic world leader, and his successor, Francis, a man-of-the-people reformer, Benedict preferred a quieter and more scholarly role in the church. A pontiff often described as a gifted theologian, more than a leader, Benedict favored traditionalism and strict doctrine, lashing out against what conservatives perceive as moral relativism as he sought to create a smaller but more theologically pure church.

His orthodoxy has left him with a complicated legacy. Some of his most controversial work in the church came before his papacy when he was, under John Paul II, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the powerful department within the Vatican that is tasked with spreading and defending Catholic doctrine. In the 1980s, then-Cardinal Ratzinger's CDF cracked down on theological debates that veered away from conservatism, investigating theologians, ousting seminary professors, and censoring articles and books. It came down hardest on the liberation theologians in Latin America who sought to empower the poor and oppressed.

As pope, Benedict also launched a deeply controversial multi-year investigation into women's religious orders in the U.S. because of the more radical views held by their members, as well as their more progressive ideas about homosexuality and gender roles in the church. As the Rev. Thomas Reese, formerly the editor-in-chief of the Jesuit magazine America, wrote in February, "Ratzinger's problem was that he treated theologians like they were his graduate students who needed correction and guidance." Many dubbed Benedict "God's Rottweiler."

There were other controversies, as well. In a report published in January 2022, Benedict was found at fault in the handling of four sex abuse cases when he was the archbishop of Munich and Freising from 1977 to 1982. In February, Benedict acknowledged the church's failings in that matter but never gave a personal apology.

On a diplomatic level, Benedict made several missteps. Most notably, at a 2006 lecture, he

appeared to suggest that Islam was an inherently violent faith by quoting a 14th-century emperor who described Islam as “evil and inhuman.” (He has said he did not intend to say he agreed with the comments. He later launched diplomatic efforts with Muslim leaders in an effort to make amends.) He also lifted the church’s excommunication on fringe right-wing bishops, including a Holocaust denier. And he rejected the promotion of condoms as a way of fighting AIDS.

More recently, Benedict had become an unwilling tool of those fighting culture wars within the church. When Benedict stepped down in 2013, he did so because he felt he no longer had the physical and mental strength to lead the institution. In doing so, he single-handedly established a new precedent for an ex-pope—a move reformers widely heralded as both selfless and wise. But some of his choices unintentionally set up an awkward situation. By styling himself as a “pope emeritus,” declining to revert to his birth name, and continuing to wear white and live in the Vatican, Benedict did not create a clean break from the position. As a result, some of those who reject the teachings and reforms of Francis—a powerful and loud contingent, particularly in the U.S.—have come to see Benedict as the legitimate leader of the church. (Many conspiracy theories within the church position Francis as an antipope.)

For the most part, Benedict had remained silent since leaving the papacy, living a quiet life of prayer in his monastery in the Vatican Gardens and giving the conspiracy theorists little to work with. But he did, at least once, make public comments that fired up Francis’ critics. In 2019, Benedict wrote a letter addressing the church’s sex abuse scandal in which he essentially contradicted Francis’ approach to the crisis. While Francis has attributed the crimes to power abuses among the clergy—“clericalism,” he calls it—Benedict instead blamed a relaxation of Catholic moral teaching, a sexualized and secular culture, and homosexuality in the priesthood.

But still, Benedict was not always the pope the ultra-conservatives liked to imagine him. He described the Second Vatican Council, the seismic modernization effort made during the 1960s that continues to be the focus of many conservatives’ angst, as “not only meaningful, but necessary.” (He did, however, work during his tenure in the CDF to promote only the more conservative interpretations of Vatican II.) He spoke of the need to act on climate change. And while he was elected to continue the conservative policies of John Paul II, he spoke more critically of unrestrained capitalism. In one encyclical, he called for the formation of a “world political authority” to regulate the financial sector and work for the “common good.”

There was another very notable way Benedict broke with John Paul’s papacy: He was the

first pope to meet with abuse victims, and he removed hundreds of abuser priests. Many have credited Benedict for moving the church toward reforms related to sex abuse—though far too slowly and reluctantly, by outside standards. In a meeting with indigenous leaders to discuss historical abuses by Catholic missionaries, Benedict displayed sorrow, even as he fell short of apologizing.

Benedict's death will also likely prompt questions about Francis' future. Francis, who is 86, has long faced rumors of death and retirement, often spread by his critics. Francis reportedly said in June that he would stay in his position “for as long as God allows it.” But he has not ruled out a retirement. In July, he admitted, “at my age and with these limitations, I have to...think about the possibility of stepping aside.” Worsening knee pain has limited his mobility—he now uses a wheelchair—and caused him to cancel a summer trip to Africa.

It seemed, to many Vatican observers, that due to the awkwardness of the situation, the pope would not want to leave the position while another former pope remained alive. Francis has said that were he to retire, he would take the title “bishop emeritus of Rome” and live outside the Vatican. With Benedict's death, he now faces the freedom to decide his own personal protocol for leaving office. ▀

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