

Why “Benedict”?

The name Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger chose was not John Paul III. It was not Paul VII. It was not John XXIV. He went back to many decades before the Second Vatican Council, and chose the name Benedict XVI. Why?

by Lucy Gordan

For the first eight days of his pontificate, Benedict XVI gave no public explanation of why he chose the name “Benedict,” or if he had considered choosing a name prior to entering the conclave. One possible hint on the subject was given privately to the cardinals immediately after his election. According to Chicago’s Cardinal Francis George, while all were still in the Sistine Chapel, His Holiness told his 115 electors: “I too hope in this short reign to be a man of peace” — a possible reference to Benedict XV, who had worked for peace during World War I.

Although each Pope has the freedom to choose any name, the decision, which he announces immediately after accepting office, is widely seen as the first major signal of the new Pope’s future policies. At his first traditional Wednesday papal audience, held in St. Peter’s Square on April 27, Benedict (which means “blessed” in Latin) finally explained his reasons:

“I wished to call myself Benedict XVI to be united ideally with the venerated Pontiff Benedict XV, who led the Church in a troubled time because of World War I. He was a courageous and authentic prophet of peace and he did his utmost with strenuous courage from the start to avoid the drama of the war and then to limit its inauspicious consequences. Following his footsteps, I wish to put my ministry at the service of reconciliation and harmony among men and nations, profoundly convinced that the great good of peace is, first of all, a gift of God, a fragile and precious gift to be invoked, defended and built day after day with the contribution of all.

“The name Benedict evokes, moreover, the extraordinary figure of the great ‘patriarch of Western monasticism,’ St. Benedict of Nursia, co-patron of Europe



Archbishop Piero Marini closes the doors to the Chapel as cardinals begin the conclave (CNS photo from L'Osservatore Romano)

together with Saints Cyril and Methodius. The gradual expansion of the Benedictine Order founded by him has had an enormous influence on the spread of Christianity on the whole Continent. Because of this, St. Benedict is much venerated in Germany and, in particular, in Bavaria, my native land. He constitutes a fundamental point of reference for the unity of Europe and a strong reminder of the inalienable Christian roots of its culture and its civilization.”

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

— Subiaco, the first great monastery founded by St. Benedict, was the site of the first printing press in Italy thanks to the arrival of German printers in 1465. One of their first publications was St. Augustine’s *City of God*, the subject of Ratzinger’s dissertation.

— In 1944, Allied bombs pulverized the Benedictine Monte Cassino Abbey, incorrectly judging it to be a stronghold of German troops. An exact copy of the abbey has since been rebuilt, just as Benedict XVI hopes to rebuild the Church in Europe.

— Benedict XVI’s birthday on April 16 falls on the feast of Saint Benedict Joseph Labre.

— On both his episcopal and papal coat-of-arms, Ratzinger chose the bear of St. Corbinian, a Benedictine who founded the diocese of Freising, to symbolize his own sense of becoming a “beast-of-burden” for God.

— St. Malachy (1094-1148), the Irish prelate who purportedly experienced a vision of 112 future popes, gave the “glory of the olive” as a sign for the 265th successor of Peter. The olive branch is the symbol of peace and of the Benedictine order, also known as the “Olivetans.” Ratzinger is not a Benedictine, but he chose “Pax” as the motto for his papacy. ●