

Franciscan University Presents

“Benedict of Bavaria”

With guest, Brennan Pursell

“Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, a simple genius”

By Brennan Pursell, Ph.D., author of *Benedict of Bavaria*

There is a general lack of knowledge about the man Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. One of the reasons I resolved to write a book about him is that many of my friends, neighbors, and students at DeSales University said in so many words, “I really don’t have an idea about who he is.” A well-known journalist who has written numerous articles about the Pope privately told me much the same thing.

The problem is basically a language gap. The people who know the Pope best, those who lived, studied, and worked with him, for decades in some cases, live in his native land of Bavaria. Their anecdotes, remembrances, and testimonies started appearing in April 2005, but only in German. About a dozen English biographies available in the USA do not make use of this important, revealing material. It has been an enormous privilege for me to compile these sources, read about thirty books by Joseph Ratzinger, and present the results in a single, accessible text. The project is itself a reward.

In the first place, everyone should know that Joseph Ratzinger is a genius, a world-class intellectual. Proof of this fact abounds in his immense body of writings and his amazing list of academic honors. Scores of people can attest to the gigantic dimensions of his memory. He has been called “the Mozart of theology” not only for the clarity and simplicity of his prose, even while expounding on the most difficult subjects, but also for the fact that he is able to write and publish *in a single draft*. Mozart routinely had whole operas completely composed in his head and then merely wrote them down, in a clean, nearly flawless manuscript. Ratzinger, it is said, can do the same with books.

Mozart came from Salzburg, a great center of art and culture. Joseph Ratzinger came from not far away, in Marktl, a tiny market town by a river crossing. His family lived one step above poverty. His father was a country constable, and his mother a seasonal cook. Both were hardworking, frugal people, and loving in their own way. He learned his faith from them, and worshipped with the local farmers and townsmen. He never lost his appreciation for the simple forms of traditional Catholic piety. Joseph Ratzinger once called himself “a perfectly ordinary Christian,” by which he meant that he was no great mystic. From his childhood to this very day, he has strongly identified his Catholic faith with that of the simple people, of rural Bavaria and across the world.

As a child, Joseph came into the age of reason while the madness of Nazism was spreading all across Germany. His father moved the family repeatedly to escape local pockets of it. Joseph grew into manhood while the Nazi military machine savaged the whole of Europe. As a teenager, drafted into the labor service, SS soldiers routinely yanked him out of bed in the middle of the night and shouted at him to enlist; Joseph clearly stated his intention to become a Catholic priest. They laughed in his face and

bawled that there will be no priests in the coming thousand years of the Third Reich. He was lucky that the abuse did not exceed the verbal. In the last days of the war, when Hitler was dead and only Nazi maniacs were keen to extend Germany's murder-suicide any further, Joseph went AWOL. He left the barracks, headed for the outskirts of town, and ran smack into two armed soldiers. He could have been shot on sight for desertion. Roughly 20,000 German soldiers were executed for the same transgression.

Love watched over him, and the soldiers let him go. Soon afterwards, two SS officers then came to his parents' house, and Joseph's father treated them to an anti-Hitler tirade. He could have been murdered on the spot. Next to come were the Americans, who took young Joseph away at gunpoint. Only after several weeks was he allowed to return to his parents' farmhouse at the foot of the Bavarian Alps. He was treated to a simple meal from his mother's kitchen garden that he will never forget.

The horrific memory of World War II has never left him, as it should never leave us. He knows how commonplace, how powerful and seductive, lies and falsehood can be for people who are reluctant to think critically. Hitler and his henchmen instituted a regime based on untruth. They promised a golden future of prosperity served on a platter of total war. They blamed all things bad on a defenseless minority and wrought the havoc we all know well. Nazi evil was more mundane than glamorous. There was nothing uplifting about any of it, even if convinced followers felt empowered.

In becoming a priest, Joseph dedicated himself to the service of truth, of peace, of love, reconciliation, and redemption. This, he knows from personal experience, is the only way forward for a world torn apart by war, suffering, stupidity, and baseness. Footed firmly in his humble, Bavarian spirituality, he has never wavered from this commitment, whether as university theologian, bishop, cardinal, or pope. Until death, Benedict XVI will proclaim the gospel tirelessly and urge all people in the world to live according to Truth and Love. And no one can do it the way he can.

*Brennan Pursell is Associate Professor of History at DeSales University. He is the author of **Benedict of Bavaria: an Intimate Portrait of the Pope and his Homeland (Circle Press, 2008)**. He has other books in the works, and leads annual trips to Bavaria. See his website at www.brennanpursell.com for more information. This text derives from a previously published article, by the same title, which appeared in the National Catholic Register.*