

Pope Benedict is not alone



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The eighth year of the pontificate of Benedict XVI is just beginning. He was elected on 19 April 2005 at the age of 78, in less than a day in the largest conclave history has ever known. A date celebrated with joy and preceded by the traditionally private one of his 85th birthday which however was not part of the series of Pope since 1895 and was therefore celebrated with more warmth than usual. The rejoicing and greetings in which the whole world joined to express general affection and esteem therefore increased, to a degree unforeseen at the time of his election. Indeed, the accumulation of prejudice, if not actual aversion, with which the lightning decision of the College of Cardinals was accepted in various, even Catholic contexts, should not be forgotten. This prejudice and aversion, with regard to Cardinal Ratzinger, dated back at least to the mid-1980s, but nothing about them corresponded to his true personality.

The successor of John Paul II – who had also been his most authoritative co-worker, summoned to Rome almost immediately by the Polish Pope, also long viewed with hostility – was set against him, in accordance with abused stereotypes. It was therefore a pontificate which began uphill and which the Pontiff faced, day after day, with the clear and patient serenity that he had shown formerly on 24 April when he asked the faithful to pray for him so that he would not flee “for fear, in front of the wolves”.

That homily was the first in what today has become a long series whose clarity and depth would not be outshone by the sermons of Leo the Great, the first by a Bishop of Rome to have been preserved. They are distinguished by an exemplary balance between classical heredity and Christian innovation, on a par with Pope Benedict's intention to move in harmony between reason and faith, to address and speak to all. This was suggested at the Assisi Meeting by his invitation – for the first time, a quarter of a century after the meeting John Paul II wanted for believers – also to non-believers, to proclaim the gospel to today's world.

It was also like this for his homily on his birthday – which coincides with that of his Baptism, Holy Saturday in 1927 – when Benedict XVI spoke of the saints commemorated in the liturgical calendar, Bernardette Soubirous and Benedict Joseph Labre, of Mary, Mother of God, and of the pure water of truth for which the world thirsts, often unawares. Friends who are invisible, but no less real for this,

The Pope feels their closeness in the Communio of Saints just as he feels the friendship of so many people who pray for him every day, or even only look at him with liking, listening attentively to his words.

g.m.v.

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