

BOOK REVIEW

My Brother, The Pope. By Georg Ratzinger. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011. 270 pp. \$24.95. ISBN 978-1-58617-704-1.

As told to Michael Hesemann through a series of in-depth interviews, Georg Ratzinger's poignant memoir is richly detailed and supplemented with excerpts from various published works on the life of Pope Benedict. Throughout this heartwarming narrative, Georg invites readers to intimately encounter life within the close-knit Ratzinger family. For those who want to better understand the origin and intrinsic nature of our pope, this book will not disappoint. This work is especially enlightening because it is recounted, not by an uninvolved journalist, but by the Pope's most trusted ally and friend, his beloved brother Georg. Through these eyes of brotherly love, Georg Ratzinger provides an inimitable portrait of Pope Benedict that illuminates the gentle, kind, and notably humble nature of this profound man.

Georg's vivid descriptions draw the reader into each unfolding event, as if being taken on an intimate journey within the heart of the Ratzinger family. He fondly describes an upbringing deeply rooted in the Catholic faith. "From our parents, we learned what it means to have a firm grasp of faith in God. Every day we prayed together" (45). Neither distance, status, nor vast job responsibilities impeded on the close nature of this family. As adult priests the brothers welcomed their parents to live in their private residences, while sister Maria dedicated herself to traveling abroad with Joseph to manage his households until her death in 1991. Especially poignant in the memoir are Georg's descriptions of the close, lifelong friendship shared between himself and younger brother Joseph. "As brothers, Joseph and I were one heart and one soul. Naturally we quarreled and fought, that is part of it, but by and large we were inseparable, and that remained so our whole life long" (76).

Recounting the difficult years leading up to and including WWII, Georg emotionally expresses his family's vehement opposition to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime. His parents made no secret of the fact that they were anti-Nazi and despised Hitler wholeheartedly (65). Describing his father's strong distain for Hitler, Georg stated, "As far as our father was concerned, Hitler was the Antichrist, even though perhaps he did not use the term directly, at least not in my presence" (112). As the war escalated, both Ratzinger brothers were forced to suspend their seminary studies and enter military service. In 1942 Georg was drafted into the armed forces. The following year younger brother Joseph was drafted first into the anti-aircraft defense, and then in 1944 into the work service of the Reich. For the future pope, Georg describes this time as "the most horrible

of his life." He recounts that men in the work service endured "nothing short of enslavement" and were continually pressured to "voluntarily" enlist in the weapons branch of the SS (122). Georg vividly recalls that even unarmed service was so repugnant to Joseph that he ultimately deserted military service, fully aware of the punishment. "He was risking his life, because the SS had orders to shoot deserters on the spot or to hang them on the nearest tree as a warning to anyone who might try to imitate them" (124).

The period after the war was a happy time for the Ratzinger family. The brothers were enthusiastic in resuming their priestly studies. Highlighting their unique passions, Georg lightheartedly reminisces that fellow students referred to Joseph as "Bookish-Ratz" and Georg as "Organ-Ratz," the younger drawn to academics, the older, to music (150). After much study, anticipation, and preparation, the most important day in the lives of the brothers arrived. On Friday, June 29, 1955, Joseph and Georg Ratzinger were together ordained priests (160).

Although priestly duty often separated the brothers, George joyfully emphasized that he and Joseph spent all of their vacations together, and still do today. For the brothers, time together was, and remains, a treasured gift. Throughout his memoir, Georg clearly conveys that his brother always remained modest and never sought out positions of power or prominence. However, in spite of his brother's humility, his astute theological insights and extraordinary academic abilities quickly earned him great respect as a theologian and a reputation of being a "Mozart of theology" (204).

In 1977 Joseph's academic life as a professor ended with his appointment as Archbishop of Munich and Freising. Said Georg, this did not suit Joseph at all, as he did not feel equal to this challenge. Only after some hesitation and a heavy heart did he consent. Always maintaining his self-effacing nature, the enormity of the position did not adversely affect the future Pope. Only three months after his installation as bishop, Pope Paul VI appointed him a cardinal. Several years later, Pope John Paul II summoned him to Rome to become the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (215).

Said Georg, life in Rome did not change Joseph very much. Always remaining modest and unassuming, he walked to work each morning carrying a worn-out briefcase under his arm, and when tourists took him for a routine priest, he did not even hint at the prominent position he held in the Vatican. When asked if his brother ever had aspirations to become pope, Georg plainly reiterated his brother never desired celebrity, prestige or power. Rather, "he was always conscientious and bore every responsibility that was imposed on him to the best of his ability" (251). "Power, career, and influence had never interested

him. His world was books, his goal: the exploration of truth; his life revolved around the faith" (221).

Approaching what he thought was the end of his official duties, Joseph Ratzinger looked forward to retirement, which he had hoped to take in 2002. He planned to remain in Rome, write additional books, visit Germany on a more regular basis to see his brother, and finish other works he had not yet completed. But John Paul II simply did not let him go, repeatedly asking him to remain in office (224). His dream of retirement was not to be realized in this world. On April 19, 2005, Joseph Ratzinger was elected to the position of Bishop of Rome and became Pope Benedict XVI. The initial shock of this appointment was especially difficult for Georg. "I saw neither the pomp nor the beauty of it, but only the challenge of this office, which now demanded everything of him, and the burden it meant for him. And I was sad that now he would probably have no more time for me" (231).

Concluding his memoir, Georg expresses that initially the prominence associated with his brother's position as pope caused him "a certain unrest," but this gradually subsided (246). He warmly confirms the close bond between the brothers remains fully intact. When asked if his brother had changed after becoming the pope, Georg replied, "Of course, he was the same old Joseph, and he still is today. The work of the Holy Spirit is limited to his official activity, but as a human being he has not changed. He does not stand on ceremony, does not try to be pretentious. He presents himself as who he is and does not want to slip into a role or wear a mask" (234).

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