

THE POPE AND THE TEDDY BEAR

Georg Ratzinger and Michael Hesemann. *My Brother, the Pope*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012.

When we encounter great men and women, it is often fascinating to learn about their upbringing, to understand how their natural endowments were nourished in a way that allowed them to flourish. When a person is not only great but famous, there is an added pleasure in learning about his childhood, long before he became renowned. In what ways was his potential greatness perceivable to those around him? What aspects of his later work were quietly formed by his early experiences?

In the case of Pope Benedict XVI, christened Joseph Ratzinger in 1927 in a small Bavarian village, one's curiosity finds plenty to satisfy it in the recently published memoir of Georg Ratzinger, modestly titled *My Brother, the Pope*. In this volume, developed by Michael Hesemann on the basis of a series of conversations with Msgr. Ratzinger, many stories and recollections about the early life of Joseph Ratzinger are related in a frank and charming manner. Georg Ratzinger, born three years before his brother Joseph, has maintained a remarkably close relationship with his brother since the time of his childhood, and his stories illuminate the early experiences of his brother, helping us to understand the familial and cultural environment from which Pope Benedict arose.

Take, for instance, the question of Gregorian chant, an area in which Pope Benedict has been keen to encourage a revival. In one passage of the memoir, Georg describes his brother's first encounter with the *Liber Usualis*, a book of chants for Mass and the Divine Office compiled by the Monks of Solesmes:

In 1935, when I was in my first year at boarding school, I received a book of chant, the *Liber Usualis*, which was used at the seminary, and nevertheless, cost five reichsmark. It was a thick book with over a thousand pages, in which Latin text and the chant notation were printed. Joseph was quite impressed, because there was not a single German word in that thick book, but after all I was in secondary school by then and was already taking Latin classes.

In another illuminating passage, Msgr. Ratzinger describes vividly the formative impact of the ordination rites at which he and his brother Joseph were ordained priests in 1951:

As we entered the cathedral, the organ thundered and the men's choir sang. Our liturgy provides us with such wonderful experiences! There was standing room only in the cathedral; the people literally thronged to participate in this special event, our ordination to the priesthood . . . The sound of the organ and the splendid colors of the flowers decorating the church did their part to intensify the already festive mood and to lend an additional, sensory dimension to it. Then the ordination rite was celebrated, in a form that was very moving to us at the time. The high point of it was the Litany of the Saints, during which we lay on the floor before the altar and in that posture prayed and sang along in complete abandonment to God. Everyone present, even our teachers and the assembled laity, joined in, so as to implore for us the help of all the saints in heaven in preparation for our ordination. Thus we became more profoundly certain that with the imposition of hands by the Archbishop, a new chapter of our life was beginning that would be pleasing to God and rich in blessings.

In addition to the details provided by the Pope's brother himself, each section contains editorial introductions provided

by Michael Hesemann, who helps the reader to understand the broader context and significance of the memories related in the book. Particularly helpful in this regard are the sections on the experience of the brothers as seminarians during the Nazi regime, which helps us, decades later, understand the progressive stages in the terrible Nazi persecution of Jews and faithful Catholics, as well as the nature of Joseph Ratzinger's participation in the German army.

The book provides interesting details for each period of the life of the Ratzinger brothers, following Joseph from his infancy through his priestly, episcopal, and curial service and Georg throughout his work in choral music at the Regensburg Cathedral. One of the most beautiful passages in the work describes the innocent, loving heart of the child Joseph Ratzinger:

During Advent, we—with my sister on the right, me on the left, and little Joseph, who could not yet walk by himself, in the middle—always used to go over to look at the display in the festively decorated shop window. There, surrounded by evergreen branches, gold foil, and tinsel, were toys that children might like to have. What fascinated Joseph most was a bear that had a very friendly expression. We went then every day, despite wind and weather, to visit the little bear, because we all liked it, but Joseph most of all had taken it to his heart. He would have liked so much to hold it in his arms. Once the owner of the shop, a very nice lady, asked us in and revealed to us the little bear's name: Teddy! Then one day, shortly before Christmas, we tried to visit the teddy bear again, but he was no longer there. My brother wept bitterly: 'The little teddy bear is gone!' We tried to console him, but he was much too sad, and really we were, too. Then we went back home, quite disappointed.

Then came Christmas and the exchange of gifts. When Joseph came into the festively decorated room where the Christmas tree stood, he was so happy he laughed out loud. For there, where the presents for us children were set out, stood the teddy bear at his place. The Christ Child had brought it for him. That gave the youngster the greatest joy of his life.

When we read this passage, we get a glimpse of what seems to be at the core of Joseph Ratzinger's humanity: simple joy in response to God's loving generosity, which in turn bestows on Ratzinger the magnanimous generosity for which he is so famous. It is only because we have received the gift of God's love that we can give any gift to our fellow men.

Throughout his pontificate, Pope Benedict has shown a spirit of magnanimous generosity, especially in his interactions with communities that might hold minority positions on liturgical practice or might be seeking communion with the Church, such as in the promulgation of the *Motu Proprio Summorum Pontificum* or the creation of the Anglican Ordinariate. These actions, although perhaps misinterpreted by some, flow from his desire to foster an environment in which all Christians may dwell in unity, to "generously open our hearts and make room for everything that the faith itself allows," as he wrote to his brother bishops in 2007.

Why is it helpful to read such anecdotes of the youth of Pope Benedict? Does it not cause us to focus too much on his human personality, whereas we should rather focus on his office, on his writings, on his actions? An analogy from the life of Christ might be helpful in understanding the value of such testimony. In the canonical Gospels we have only a few hints of the experiences of Jesus before the beginning of his public ministry, and yet these glimpses give us tremendous insight into the God-man.

In addition to the theological insights we can gain from contemplating passages such as Luke 2:52 ("And Jesus increased



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in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man”), an important part of the Church’s liturgical and devotional life revolves around such scenes as the Nativity of Our Lord, the Presentation in the Temple, and the Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple. According to St. Thomas, the Church’s focus on these mysteries of Christ’s humanity extends from our nature as embodied creatures:

Such is the weakness of the human mind that it needs a guiding hand, not only to the knowledge, but also to the love of Divine things by means of certain sensible objects known to us. Chief among these is the humanity of Christ, according to the words of the Preface [of the Nativity], “that through knowing God visibly, we may be caught up to the love of things invisible.” Wherefore matters relating

to Christ's humanity are the chief incentive to devotion, leading us thither as a guiding hand, although devotion itself has for its object matters concerning the Godhead (*STh* II-II, q. 82, a. 3, ad 2).

Although the evangelists have only given a few precious details about Jesus' "hidden life," focusing their enunciation of the Gospel on Christ's public apostolate of preaching and his Passion and Resurrection, these words of saving truth about Jesus' birth and childhood profoundly shape the Church's understanding and proclamation of the Word who has dwelt among us, who is like us in all things but sin. In the case of the successor of St. Peter, described so richly in metaphorical terms by St. Catherine of Siena as "sweet Christ on earth," we are called not to pray to but to pray for the holder of the office, presently Pope Benedict XVI.

The greatest contribution of this volume is that it will help Catholics acquire a certain "devotion" to this successor of St. Peter. This should by no means be confused with the devotion and worship owed to God, but the human devotion by which families are held together in bonds of love and affection. *My Brother, the Pope* offers a glimpse of the humanity of our Holy Father, our Papa, which in turn helps us to remember to pray for him and his intentions, and to pray that more men and women in the Church will imitate his magnanimity and his faithful witness to Christ.

Innocent Smith entered the Order of Preachers in 2008.