

Following the life of Fr. Joseph Ratzinger

“Have I been a good pastor?” (German: Seelsorger, someone who cares for souls)

Fr. Joseph Ratzinger spent nearly a year in a parish in Munich. It was his only position as pastor. 70 years later Pope Emeritus goes down memory lane corresponding with this author.

By Benedict XVI and Tobias Winstel

He is just 24 years old and just finished his studies in Catholic theology. Together with his older brother, Georg, he was ordained priest in Munich. He comes from humble homes, but is considerate to be intelligent and educated, and yet he comes across as insecure and shy. It is late in the summer of 1951 and he is about to start his position as pastor, *Kaplan*, in the parish *Heilig Blut* (Precious Blood) in *Bogenhausen*, a middle class district of Munich.

“To be questioning even when one is believing” (insert)

Why does *Joseph Ratzinger* even want to become a pastor? What are his hopes, his fears?. At this point he cannot know that he will be elected pope one day. That he will enter history in his life time - being one of the most significant and simultaneously controversial heads of his time, as second pope to voluntarily retire from his *“Amt”* (comment: ministerium or munus?). Seventy years ago this summer he sees the path of a priest who first has to learn how to be in touch with his parish.

During today’s corona pandemic it is not possible to conduct a face-to-face interview with Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in the Vatican. But he was willing to walk down

memory lane internally from September 1951 until early summer of 1952. To accomplish that he answered written questions. This resulted in a special form of a conversation which shows that he is deeply focussed in written form, and comes across almost more authentic than in free speech. He remains fully author, not a man of big deeds or spontaneous words.

The internal walk begins with the question of how *Fr. Ratzinger* experienced the step from pure thought and teaching into the reality of one's daily faith and belief or even unbelief. How was it for this young priest to be confronted with his parishioners' questions and doubts of faith? In his parish in *Bogenhausen*, did he meet a different religiosity, devotion and fear of the Lord, than what he experienced in his childhood in *Aschau am Inn*?

"I was naturally confronted with the people's questions and doubts of faith, and naturally were the devotions (*Frömmigkeit*) which I experienced in *Heilig But* in the town of *Bogenhausen* different from the ones I experienced in the village of *Aschau*. In contrast, the situation with the community of high schoolers I belonged to in *Traunstein* was again very similar to the situation in *Bogenhausen*. But mainly, even as a believer, one remains always someone who asks questions / seeks answers, who always has to find the reality of faith behind and against the realities of every day life. In this regard, the thought of a "flight into pure thought and teaching" seems to be completely unrealistic. Teaching that is separated like a state park from the daily practice of the faith and its needs would at the same time be a denial of faith itself. Our teaching must develop in and from our faith and can't not stand beside it", writes Benedict XVI early in the summer of 2021 in our written communication.

By the way, Ratzinger did not even fulfill the formal requirements. As can be read in *Peter Seewald's* comprehensive biography "*Benedikt XVI. Ein Leben*" (Benedict XVI. A Life.), Ratzinger never underwent specific training (*Pfarrkonkurs*), which was a

prerequisite for a parish priest and something like an application for that position. Was this a sign that he actually did not want to be a parish priest?

“Once couldn’t pick whether or when one would undergo this training. Rather, within the three years after ordination retreats took place every year late in the summer for the entire class of recently ordained priests, which I participated in. It was only the year after those retreats that one could undergo specific training (*Pfarrkonkurs*). But by that point I had already moved into a teaching position, and it no longer appeared to make sense to simultaneously examine and be examined.

Today the name for “*Pfarrkonkurs*” has changed. This prerequisite to become pastor of a parish is named by the Archdiocese of Munich “*zweite Dienstprüfung*” (second examen for a pastoral position), and contains amongst other requirements a written reflection on practical-theological question and considerations. Which topic would *Joseph Ratzinger* have picked, if this examen had been a requirement back then?

“I would have picked one of the practical topics, for instance preparation for First Holy Communion. As far as the retreats in *Fürstenried*, where I spent two years of my theology studies, I remember them fondly. The first year of this retreat a religious priest who gave the retreats on a high spiritual and human level. In the second year we had *Fr. Hugo Rahner*, the brother of *Karl Rahner*. His retreats were on a high level, but the felt a bit more depressing - possibly this was due to the beginning of Parkinsons, which darkened his temperament somewhat. The third year I had a Jesuit from St. Michael in Munich which were less demanding, but joyful and encouraging. He told many small, funny anecdotes. Once during exam prep he related that nothing was working out for him; but when I put on the hat of *Fr. Mayer* he received the desired inspiration.”

Before *Joseph Ratzinger* began his post as chaplain in *Bogenhausen* he was “lent” to the parish in *Moosach*, north of Munich, and had to take over everything there. This

was a huge task for the newly ordained priest, and today it would be considered as way too much for a young priest. Was that too much work for him, commonly said?

“It was not too much work for me. However, I was in need for some guidance. The parish priest had a heart attack, and was in recovery, the chaplain also, and the parish sister was absent, so that nobody was there to help me with guidance in difficult questions. My work was nice work, also in *Moosach*, but problematic without guidance.”

People who experienced his presence describe him as withdrawn, oriented more towards inside than outside, self-conscious and almost shy. The parish priest of *Heilig Blut* (Precious Blood) at the time was *Max Blumenschein*. It seems as if he immediately recognized in his new chaplain the brilliant theologian, but also noticed his shyness. Did he perhaps begin to decide in these days of pastoral work, to continue his priestly ministry outside of parish work?

“I did think of a life as theologian for a while. I did compose my thesis on St. Augustine, after all. This thesis was announced by the theological faculty for the year 1950/51, and I finished my work Summa Cum Laude. I did not believe that I could finish my doctorate with the “*Rigorosa*” (a very rigorous and strict examination) next to my work as a parish priest.

His ministry in the confessional

Was the parish in *Bogenhausen* particularly religious, devoted, city-like, Catholic?

“When I arrived in Munich from *Traunstein* I did not find Munich particularly Catholic. It was amazing for me to get to know the religious interior of that city through my work as priest, have I only got to know the academic profile of that city through my studies. Amazingly, I found out just how much faith was hidden in that city, and just how much strength from this faith was keeping the people together.

Were there spaces to retreat to, perhaps even outside of the church buildings?

“One of my retreat spots was actually not outside of the building but rather deep in its interior, in the confessional. *Fr. Blumenschein* was of the opinion that as much opportunity for confession needed to be provided; and he even believed that it is better for a priest to wait in the confessional for an hour than to deprive a faithful of the opportunity because no priest was waiting in the confessional. So, every morning at 6 I had to be in the confessional till 7am Mass which I had to celebrate. This hour was almost always free, as well as the period of time for confessions on Saturday from 4 till 8, and the faithful appeared late for confession. The morning hour in particular was valuable to me to slowly adjust to the day’s demands and to pray the pretty long breviary in peace and quiet.”

This priest who later would be professor in dogmatic is in the confessional to give absolution to sinners. During his first week as a new chaplain he probably sat 30 to 40 hours in the confessional. In his autobiography “*Aus meinem Leben*” (From my Life; Munich 2015) he writes: “In this manner I experienced directly just how much people are waiting for the priest, just how much people are desiring the blessings which flows from this sacrament. (...) They see in us people, touched by Our Lord’s mandate and who were able to bring this closeness to Christ to the people.” This sounds pretty metaphysical, but would he have gone to see *Fr. Ratzinger* for confession and Holy Mass? “I have always loved celebrating Mass, but the ministry in the confessional was difficult for me. While many confessions were according to the book, there were some experiences of faith which let me feel the beauty and necessity of this ministry. I was able to witness how people as they encountered God also themselves made a new beginning, and how they let Our Lord give them their life anew,” writes Benedict XVI today.

About Resistance fighters.

In addition to the hours in the confessional he took his bike through Munich to celebrate funerals; he also celebrated baptism, and weddings. He had to teach at the elementary school, which even today is located within the parish boundaries. He was in charge of his youth in the parish too. This was a huge challenge for a young priest who just finished his studies and had no practical experience. Did he feel that he was needed or taken advantage of by the higher-ups? Which of those tasks did he consider most important? Which task overwhelmed him?

“I never thought that I was taken advantage of; but I knew I was needed. The most important task was my work at school. I had to teach 10 hours in 4 different grades covering different material, and that required time to prepare. Also preparing homilies required time for reflection and preparation. As regards my work with the youth, I never allotted enough time, although that would have been wonderful.”

About 10 years before Ratzinger, *Hermann Josef Wehrle* was chaplain in *Heilig Blut* (Precious Blood). After the assassination attempt of July 20 he was arrested as accomplice to the resistance and hanged. *Fr. Alfred Delp, S.J.* also worked in this parish. He was murdered by the Nazis as a member of the *Kreisauer Kreis* (Kreisau Circle; dissidents) just before the end of the war. What impact did these two witnesses to the faith and humanity have on him, and what was their lasting impact in that parish?

“*Delp* and *Dr. Wehrle*, were honored in the parish. There was already a plaque with the names of 4 people who were murdered in connection with the assassination attempt 1944. There was a debate because allegedly one of those four was responsible for the arrest of *Dr. Wehrle*. This affair was pretty complicated, and we need to be careful passing blame. Since *Dr. Wehrle* lived in the rectory as pastor, his memory was still very alive. On the other hand, we could read the most beautiful texts by *Fr. Delp* who by the way made his fourth vow as a Jesuit with *Fr. Franz von Tattenbach*. He was our

spiritual director in *Freising*, and had family who lived in the parish of *Heilig Blut*. As far as I know *Fr. Delp's* beatification is progress. I do not know why there is no such effort for *Dr. Wehrle*. A chaplain who is canonized would be a wonderful and challenging thing.

St. Georg, originally the first church in *Bogenhausen*, was part of *Heilig But parish*. Early in the 50s it was a small village church having a cemetery attached as it used to be. A baroque treasure chest, which was used for special festivities and prayer services - and still is. Let us "step into" the cemetery of little *St. Georg*, where significant personalities such as *Erich Kästner*, *Liesl Karlstadt* oder *Helmut Dietl* are buried. Which tomb would Benedict XVI visit today?

"*Wilhelm Hausenstein*, publicist and diplomat, is buried there. He ordered that I could pick the books I loved the best from his personal library. Also actress, *Liesl Karlstadt* is buried there; I saw her repeatedly in the theater and respected her very much. I would also visit Hans-Jochen Vogel who past away just last year and is buried there. To me he was a politician who took his Christian faith as guideline very seriously, even if he believed that he could justify a more loose interpretation with regards to the abortion question. Actor *Gustl Waldau* is buried there; I never met him personally, but a close friend of his attempted to get him to go to confession with me. She was obviously convinced that inside he wanted reconciliation with the Church, but scared away at the thought of confession being the way. This lady obviously believed that confession with me could open the door for reconciliation, and thus prepared me for a meeting with *Gustl Waldau*. Finally, I would visit the tomb of *Hans Wimmer*. I regard him as one of the most significant artists of the 20th century who would deserve much wider recognition, even abroad. I met him as a humble man, who was aware of the greatness of his mission."

Whenever he had to celebrate Mass at *St. Georg*, he passed the tomb of Johann von Lamont. He was astronomer and director of the Royal Observatory till the end of his life. The observatory can still be seen from the church steeple. Children and needy people regularly check the hand of *Lamont's* statue, hoping for some coins which would miraculously appear in his hand; a remnant of folk devotion and superstition which may be foreign to *Ratzinger* who was more rational than that. Was this not a special place to spend time while searching for God and proof of His existence?

“To be honest, I did not know *Johann von Lamont* as a young chaplain. So, my passing his grave was not significant. I was much rather interested in the figures who were close to my life or to that of parishioners in *Bogenhausen*. And I find it sad that the living and the dead, including the cemetery next to our church, can no longer be together today. However, I find it very funny that the old mortuary was taken over by the youth and remodeled to a youth center. I spent many evenings there with the Catholic Youth, at a place that was a place of death and became a place of life.”

Holding Sermons during children's Mass

Looking back, one of the young people of that time that especially the young people were fascinated by the young chaplain; they held bible evenings and youth group events, choir practice and Mass for the youth every Thursday after 6. Was it not especially difficult to adjust Christian teaching to the level of bible study and youth Masses? What did he who was only a few years older than those young people learn from them?

“Whatever I learned from those young people I cannot express in form of sentences or content. It was more the manner to understand faith and to live it, especially by dealing with people who search for that faith but cannot find it. Those 5 Masses that were celebrated every Sunday in *Bogenhausen* all had their individual crowd. Early Mass at 6:30 was celebrated by a priest from *Slesia* who interpreted the gospel in a traditional

manner. At 7:30 there were faithful who were more sophisticated and firmly anchored in the faith. At 9am we had regular Mass with organ, choir, and orchestra on feast days. Our pastor held the homily, but he did not speak from the ambo, but stood in the first pew due to his weak voice. He gave more talking points so that the group of people listening was pretty small. At 10:30 we had children's Mass which was celebrated by the chaplain. More intellectual Catholics assisted at 11:30 Mass. Typically the Jesuits spoke at 7:30, at 11:30 we had the Oratorians, esp. *Philipp Dessauer*; homily at children's Mass was mine to do, and it brought me a lot of joy and was accepted well. It became obvious that in faith even the adults are children, and thus were able to be led to maturity in faith. The numbers who assisted at children's Mass increased. In the end it became the best visited Mass, where people were happy with standing room, and our church was packed. In the end *Fr. Blumenschein* had me hold the homily at 7:30 Mass, which led to the fact that I had to prepare two different homilies on many Sundays.

Were you to speak with parishioners from *Heilig Blut* who got to know *Fr. Ratzinger* one would see that he left a deep impression, although he spent barely a year there. One elementary school girl in faith formation was so deeply impressed by this young priest that she wrote him a letter after he had left. In 51/52 she and her sister were students of his in elementary school, and the young chaplain in black left a great impression on those children. "I cannot remember very well his classes. His homilies definitely were very popular. He was also there when I made my First Holy Communion, next to *Fr. Blumenschein*. I remember that my father said "This is a very good young priest; watch something will become of him" (comment: this is printed in Bavarian dialect). When *Fr. Ratzinger* then moved to *Freising* after a year in *Bogenhausen* my sister and I wrote him a letter. And he answered: "In the end, whether someone is on the side of light or darkness does not depend on what a person says, but what he is." He continues: "It is good that your chaplain is strict, for remember the saying by the old

Greeks which I told you in my homily at the beginning of school: Sweat and hard work precede competence.

With whom was he more strict - with himself or his students? Looking back, does he think this was the most difficult task?

“I did not have the strength to be really strict in school. Allow me to take this opportunity to express my thanks to the teachers who made it possible that I could do faith formation without having to exercise tough discipline because their presence guaranteed that the students were disciplined. *Fr. Blumenschein* too was too good natured to be strict. There was a familiar atmosphere in *Bogenhausen* which encouraged us all to work and helped us not to be crushed by it.”

Fr. Blumenschein seems to have been an impressive person. In his memoirs “Aus mine Leben” Joseph Ratzinger called him an example, a person who is on fire, who said a priest must be on fire. Was *Max Blumenschein* a good pastor? By the way, what makes a man a good pastor? According to those examples was Fr. Ratzinger himself a good priest and pastor?

“There are no doubts that Fr. Blumenschein was a good paster. Whether I was one, I don’t dare to decide. I did give it my best shot, in my own wise, to do justice to the demands of my priesthood and my ordination.

Blumenschein had young *Fr. Ratzinger* preach during children’s Mass - but he noticed very soon that he could also assign him to the other Masses. Thus one could see Pastor *Blumenschein* in many a Mass while *Ratzinger* preached, walking up and down in church - saying to his parishioners “Isn’t his preaching amazing? His homily is something very special.”

Withdrawing from the world (Entweltlichung - deworldification)

(My comment: *Entweltlichung* is a difficult concept, but withdrawing from the world comes close. Lifesitenews coined the term “deworldification”. I will use it here as a crutch)

Is there a homily from this time that was repeated later, which he may have picked again or developed?

“I remember only one homily which I held at a First Communion Mass in 1952 towards the end of my year in that parish. I said that people had always more and more strongly through their progress looked for the remedy against death. But they were not successful. One day someone shouted: it was found, the remedy. There is someone who found it. And of course, everybody ran to also receive this remedy and to chase away death once and for all. After describing this situation more colorfully, I said: yes, there is this someone who has the remedy for death. He is Jesus Christ. And from that point on I attempted to explain Holy Communion using the gospel of St. John, chapter 6.

For many priests their first pastoral experience must be an essential step on their journey. Evidently Ratzinger had his understanding of “*Entweltlichung*” during his time and based on his experiences. Six decades later, after he had become Pope and he undertook his journey to Germany he noticed that a large number of baptized Catholics had distanced themselves from life in the Church. “In order to realize her mission”, he spoke in the famous speech in *Freiburg*, “she will always distance herself from her environment, she has to “deworldify” herself. What was the central thought he took away from *Bogenhausen* continued to develop? Was he aware at the time that he was on the track of a thinking with consequences?

“I do not know whether the term “*Entweltlichung*” which comes from *Heidegger’s* sophisticated vocabulary, and which I chose as final word in my speech in *Freiburg*, was optimal. The concept/thought, however, became clearer and clearer during my time as chaplain, and I have described it in my article “*Die neuen Heiden und die*

Kirche” (the new pagans and the church) published by Kösel-Verlag in the Catholic magazine, *Hochland*, which received unexpected responses.

My time in Bogenhausen showed me that there are many structures and functions in the life of the church which were implemented by people who did not share the faith (Brother, there must be a printing error in the German original as this sentence makes no sense; I did my best with it. Their testimony must appear questionable in many ways. Belief and unbelief were mixed up in a strange way, and this had to become apparent at some point, and cause a break down which would end up burying the faith. It appeared to me that a separation became necessary. However, one couldn't and mustn't think of the church of our saints. This thought shows up again and again in history, and it is a fallacy, which reality always and immediately rejects; this became obvious to me in my studies on Augustin about donatism. Donatism developed at the end of persecution in northern Africa, when bishops, who had made compromises with the pagan state, continued as if they had been faithful shepherds. Not a few of the faithful rejected such shepherds. Only those priests should be admitted to the episcopacy who remained untainted during persecution and showed themselves as loyal shepherds to the faithful. This initial thought separated this sect more and more from the Church and factually proved that part of the Church are wheat and chaff, good and bad fish. The objective therefore was not to separate good from bad but rather to differentiate between believers and unbelievers.

This problem becomes more and more apparent. In institutions run by the Church - hospitals, schools, Caritas - are many people in important positions who do not represent the inner mandate of the Church, and thus obscure the witness these institutions give. This has an impact on announcements and public statements. The term “*Amtskirche*” was coined to describe that there exists an contradiction between those who are officials in the Church and that personal faith. The term “*Amtskirche*”

insinuates an internal contradiction between this which faith actually aims for and means, and its depersonalization (when faith becomes just a function).

Sadly, one has to admit that the official statements of the Church in Germany are mostly composed by people for whom faith is just a function (comment: going through the motions). I do have to admit that the term “*Amtskirche*” is very fitting for many of those official/institutional texts in Germany. I remember a case, when we asked a friend of mine, a young bishop for a manuscript on behalf of an international Catholic magazine (I myself was professor), in which we asked him to describe his Intention and his work of his section of the conference of Catholic Bishops. The manuscript he sent to us was evidently composed by his section (not himself personally); in reality it was the language of an apparatus, and not the language of an individual person. Sadly, I made this experience repeatedly.

Whatever the Church has to say as an institution is from an institution not from a person. As long as the Institution speaks in official, institutional writings, and not the heart and the spirit, so long will the exodus from the world of faith continue. Therefore it was important to me then and now to remove the person from the cover of the “Amt” (institution), and expect a true and authentic witness to the faith from those speakers. The term “*Entweltlichung*” implies the negative angle of this movement which I am talking about, namely stepping out of the speech and constraint of a time into the freedom of faith. But this angle, the positive angle, is not expressed sufficiently.

After spending nearly a year in *Heilig Blut* Joseph Ratzinger moved to *Freising*. His departure from *Bogenhausen* was bitter sweet: on the one hand he anticipated the new mission and intellectual challenge, on the other hand he experience in this parish what it is like to be needed. Clearly, he could not have both, theological research and pastoral priestly ministry.

“It is precisely this apparent alternative that made it difficult for me sometimes to return to academic work. But in the end I understood that this alternative dissolves once you

understand the work of a theologian correctly. Especially concerning today's confusion it becomes obvious how urgently theologians are needed for whom bookwork is important, but this bookwork does not have the last word, and who needs especially the work of parish pastors and chaplains and those who are in this world who wrestle with their questions and missions - the mission of those who wrestle with the questions of our time, who really help to live life in and out of faith.

Precious piece of life

What is the future like for a pastor who today is responsible for several parishes? Heilig Blut was joined with another parish to a parish community. It becomes more and more difficult to find pastors. At the same time the number of faithful decreases. Is it even possible to be a pastor for several flocks or on several pastures?

"It was after the First World War that *Heilig Blut* was founded from two mother parishes, *Bogenhausen* and *St. Gabriel in Haidhausen*. Thus the community with St. Gabriel is really just a return. How to practically implement cooperation beyond parish boundaries I don't dare to say. We have to find ways to let people experience the closeness of Mother Church, but also consider the limits of individual pastors. I would not speak of "several flocks" as it is always the One Church of Jesus Christ. Maintaining boundaries and limits must be regulated.

Before the Second World War it was not seldom that you had parishes with 60,000 faithful. After WW2 they introduced the principle that no parish should have more than 10,000 parishioners. *Emperor Josef II* of Austria held the opinion that nobody should live more than an hour from his parish, and only take half an hour to get to church. Based on that idea he ordered the founding of parishes. *Bertram Cardinal von Breslau* used his watch walking through his city to determine how to place parishes so nobody needed to take more than 30 minutes to church. This way new dioceses were founded after WW2, for instance the city of Essen, which *Bischof Franz Hengsbach* made into a

parish during the heydays of the *Ruhrgebiet*; that structure is totally out dated today. We should definitely be flexible in this sense.

By the way, I would never expect from a young man who prepares to become a priest to come up with a structure which he would find 20 years later. He knows one thing, the best thing: I will always be needed wherever people need the priest, need him spiritually, and where he will lead them to God, what ever the external structure. That structure is secondary and is only an aid to pastoral ministry. Perhaps the ecumenical way can be used to strengthen Christian community. Nearby *Heilig Blut* is the Lutheran *Dreieinigkeitskirche* (Trinity Church). Did Fr. Ratzinger have connections to the Lutheran community, did he collaborate with the preacher there, conduct joint activities, or have ecumenical plans?

“Sadly, I have to say no. Our contact was friendly to the Lutherans, whose preacher seemed to really have ecumenical intentions. For instance, once he invited Romano Guardini to give a conference at his community. There seem to have been some intellectual closeness, which, however, did not manifest itself in joint actions.”

Joseph Ratzinger began his priesthood and pastoral ministry in a parish in *München-Bogenhausen*. He went back in his memories, looked back to his ministry back then, remembered places and people that surrounded him at the time; and he looked back to the ministries which influence pastoral service, the care of souls, back then as well as now. In his detailed letter in which he communicates the answers to my questions he replies in conclusion: “Even if I will no longer be able to walk the paths of *Bogenhausen*, the remain a precious part of my life, which will remain part of me in the next life.”