



**Mass of Thanksgiving
Commemorating the Pontificate of Benedict XVI
The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls
February 28, 2013
Cathedral of Saint Joseph**

Today, in an historic moment and in the last hour of his pontificate, we gather to celebrate the holy sacrifice of the Mass in thanksgiving for the sacrificial witness of faith of His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI. For the last time we will pray in holy Mass for “Benedict, our pope”. But it will not be the last time we pray for Benedict, Pope emeritus.

There is a sadness to this day. Earlier this morning when I watched the Pope leave the Vatican tears came to my eyes. An unique era is ending. Yet the reality is that this moment is also a hopeful time. The Holy Father has reminded us that it is Christ who is head of the Church and others, including popes, are only his instruments. Earlier today His Holiness met with the Cardinals of the Church as one by one they came forward to offer signs of respect and gratitude. We do so here this day.

How, we might ask, has this Pope touched our lives and our diocese. Allow me to cite a few ways:

He appointed me the eighth bishop of Sioux Falls. The jury is still out whether that was a wise decision.

He was especially influential in helping us recognize the importance of beauty in the spiritual that lifts our sights to the transcendent. It is reflected in sacred art and music which influenced the restoration of this Cathedral of Saint Joseph and in the liturgies and concerts that are prayed and performed here and around the diocese.

He also has been an inspiration to many young people, and some of us older folks as well, teaching and calling us all to know the faith and defend the truth with courage and perseverance.

He has been a model for me of a patient shepherd; I only wish I had been a better student.

While we could revel in the brilliance of this Pope as a scholar, author, linguist, and more, it is the humble priest that strikes me as his lasting impression and most significant contribution.

The first reading from this Thursday in the second week of Lent captures his priesthood. “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is in the Lord.”¹ How appropriate that is for this wise pope who, in his remarks in his last general audience yesterday noted, “Loving the Church also means having the courage to make difficult, trying choices, having always before one the good of the Church and not oneself.”²

The Gospel reading recalls the beggar Lazarus who is comforted and therefore rewarded in the world to come though ignored in this world. When Benedict was asked how does the Pope pray, he responded, “As far as the Pope is concerned, he too is a simple beggar before God – even more than all other people.”³

In an interview he was asked: “You did not want to become a bishop, you did not want to become a Prefect, you did not want to become Pope.” (I might submit that in his heart he did not want to retire because of physical limitation.), the questioner went on, “Isn’t it frightening when things happen quite against your will?” His response was:

“It is like this: When a man says Yes during his priestly ordination, he may have some idea of what his own charism could be, but he also knows: I have placed myself into the hands of the bishop and ultimately the Lord. I cannot pick and choose what I want. In the end I must allow myself to be led. I had in fact the notion that being a theology professor was my charism, and I was very happy when my idea became a reality. But it was also clear to me: I am in the Lord’s hands, and I must be prepared for things that I do not want. In this sense it was certainly surprising suddenly to be snatched away and no longer be able to follow my own path. But as I said, the fundamental Yes also contained the thought that I remain at the Lord’s disposal and perhaps will also have to do things someday that I myself would not want.”³

This likely is such a day.

Yet he did and does them in humility, love and faith. He summed up his papacy in his remarks yesterday:

“[These years] have been a stretch of the Church’s pilgrim way, which has seen moments of joy and light, but also difficult moments. I have felt like St. Peter with the Apostles in the boat on the Sea of Galilee: the Lord has given us many days of sunshine and gentle breeze, days in which the catch has been abundant; [then] there have been times when the seas were rough and the wind against us, as in the whole history of the Church it has ever been - and the Lord seemed to sleep. Nevertheless, I always knew that the Lord is in the barque, that the barque of the Church is not mine, not ours, but His - and He shall not let her sink.”²

Thank you God for Joseph Ratzinger, priest and Benedict XVI, pope. May Our Lady watch over him.

Viva il Papa, Viva il Papa emeritus.

¹ – Jeremiah 17:5-10

² – Pope Benedict XVI, February 27, 2013, Wednesday general audience

³ – *Light of the World*, Ignatius Press, November 24, 2010