

POPE EMERITUS BENEDICT XVI (1927-2022)

Homily by Msgr. John K. Aniagwu, January 3, 2023, at Holy Cross Cathedral, Lagos.

1. On the 2nd of December 2012, I saw and bought a book titled "The Pope Who Quit". The book tells the story of a certain Italian hermit in the thirteenth century A.D., named Pietro di Morone (Peter of Morone).
2. After the death of Pope Nicholas IV in 1292, the College of Cardinals went into a conclave to elect a new Pope. For two years and three months, they could not elect a Pope. Then they received a scathing letter from an obscure hermit from his mountain hermitage. His name was Pietro di Morone. He thrashed the Cardinals for failing to elect a new Pope for so long, and urged them to stop the nonsense, and elect a Pope immediately. In a curious response, the Cardinals decided to conscript Pietro himself from his mountain hermitage, and make him the Pope. He was aged 84. He took the name Celestine V.
3. From the get-go, Celestine was a reluctant Pope. Imagine going from a hermitage on a mountain to occupy the papal throne in Rome. It was a very uncomfortable transition for the poor hermit. After only four months in office, August to December 1294, he had had enough. He literally ran away from the Papacy, and returned to his hermitage on Mount Morone. The Cardinals did all they could to bring him back to Rome, but he would have none of it. They had no other choice than to elect someone else as Pope. That was how Pope Celestine became the first Pope to quit the Papacy.
4. On the 11th of February 2013, two months after I bought and read my book, the reigning Pontiff, Benedict XVI, shocked the world by announcing that he was going to resign from the Papal office. Not a few people around the world, Catholics and non-Catholics, thought that it was an abomination. "A Pope had never resigned before. A Pope should never resign. A Pope should stay in office until death." Those people, obviously, had never heard about Pietro di Morone, Pope St. Celestine V, the Pope who quit in December 1294. They also had not heard about Pope Nicholas XII, who also quit in 1415. In fact, Benedict XVI was going to be the third Pope to quit, 600 years after Nicholas XII.
5. Rather unfortunately, what many people know about Pope Benedict who left us two days ago, on New Year's Eve, is that he was a Pope who quit, a Pope who did the unthinkable by leaving the Papal office through resignation rather than by death. In reality, there was so much more to this Pope than the way he left office. Benedict XVI was a man of an immensely towering stature. He attained that stature even before he became Pope.
6. Born Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger on April 16, 1927 at Marktl in Germany, he was ordained priest on June 29, 1951. A brilliant scholar, he began an academic career at the Higher School of Philosophy and Theology in Freising, Germany, becoming a full Professor of Theology in 1958 at the mere age of thirty-one. He later taught at the Universities of Bonn, Munster, Tubingen and Regensburg, in succession. He was consecrated Archbishop of Munich and Freising, Germany on May 28, 1977. One month later, on June 27, 1977, he was created a Cardinal by Pope St. Paul VI. Four years later, in 1981, he was summoned to Rome by Pope St. John Paul II to head the

prestigious Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, CDF, as Prefect. He held that position until his election as Pope on April 19, 2005, in succession to the same John Paul II.

7. Before becoming Pope, Joseph Ratzinger was renowned as a brilliant theologian. Along with Bishop Karol Jozef Wojtyla, the future Pope John Paul II, and several other notable scholars, Ratzinger was a Peritus, that is, “an Expert” at the Second Vatican Council, 1962-1965. In that capacity, he was among a group of eminent theologians who helped to shape the thinking and eventual message of the Council. Both before and after becoming Pope, Joseph Ratzinger had a prodigious academic output. His books and academic papers are in the hundreds, if not thousands. However, rather surprisingly, he wrote only three Encyclicals; namely, *Deus Caritas Est* (“God is Love”) in December 2005, *Spe Salvi* (“In Hope we are saved”) in November 2007, and *Caritas in Veritate* (“Charity in Truth”) in January 2009.

8. I believe that it is fair to say that Benedict is better remembered as a Theologian than as a Pope. His Papacy was rather obscure, when compared with others who were Pope before or after him. That is because he was a rather shy and private person. It has been said that he accepted the Papal office reluctantly. He did not want to be Pope. But once he was elected, he had no other choice than to accept the office. For eight years, he held the Church together, promoting orthodoxy in faith and morals. Some critics called him conservative. But I believe he was just trying to uphold the Tradition and Patrimony of the Catholic Church as handed on by the Apostles. And that was a very good thing. While some people and some currents were trying to take the Church in a direction that was alien to her, Pope Benedict stopped them in their tracks. He saw to it that the Catholic Church remained Catholic, the way it was handed on by the Apostles, the Fathers of the Church and the Magisterium of the Church.

9. While being a renowned scholar, Pope Benedict was also a saintly person, as far as human eyes can see. He was a committed and dedicated priest, Bishop, Cardinal, and later Pope. He lived his priestly life to the full, and continued to do so even after leaving office as Pope. He spent the last nine years of his life in a convent within the Vatican City, praying, meditating, writing, and preparing to meet his Maker. He was fully prepared when the Maker called him the day before yesterday, 31st December 2022, at the ripe old age of 95. If he ends up being canonized a Saint one day, I believe that he will also be declared a Doctor of the Church on the strength of the sheer volume and calibre of his doctrinal output. That will be an honour more than well deserved. Then he will join the ranks of the likes of St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory Nazianzen whose feast day occurs today, 2nd January 2023, and indeed, his illustrious intellectual mentor, St. Augustine of Hippo. The words of the Antiphon to the Benedictus at today’s Morning Prayer will apply to him: The learned will shine as brightly as the vault of heaven, and those who have instructed many in virtue will shine like stars for all eternity.

10. Our current Pontiff, Pope Francis, has described his illustrious predecessor as God’s Gift to the Church in our time. His contribution to the Patrimony of the Church, both as a scholar and a Pope, is unquantifiable. He loved the Church, and served the Church with uncommon passion. If indeed Benedict the XVI is God’s Gift to the Church, as Pope Francis says, then we should be thanking God for the gift that he is. That is one of the things that we are doing at this Mass.

11. We are thanking God that there ever was such a man as Benedict XVI, as we would thank God for so many other Saints and Scholars, over the centuries, who have left indelible marks on the Church and whose footprints will never be erased from the sands of time. So, thank God for Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. However, Pope Benedict is not yet a canonized Saint. God willing, he will be some day. But for now, he was just a mere mortal, flesh and blood like us. He was subject to many of the frailties of all humans. Therefore, this Mass is also a Mass of supplication for the eternal repose of his soul. We are asking our merciful God to forgive any shortcomings that he might have had during his life on earth. We are asking God to give him a merciful judgment, and welcome him to paradise, through Christ our Lord.

12. What he teaches us: Love God

I believe that Pope Benedict has many lessons to teach us. I will touch on a just few of them. First of all, he teaches us to love God above all things. His mind and heart were always focused on God. His love for God was the driving force behind his career as a Theologian. He wanted to know all that was humanly knowable about God. Then he used his enormous gifts of preaching, teaching and writing to pass on what he knew to as many of God's children as possible. The Catholic Church today is a huge beneficiary of what he passed on. My brothers and sisters, we too should endeavour to love God as passionately as Pope Benedict did. Then, we shall use our gifts, our time, our talents and our treasures in wholehearted service of God as long as we shall live on this earth. We shall not allow any opportunity to pass us by to render service to God in the Church or in the community where we live.

13. What he teaches us: love the Church

Secondly, Pope Benedict loved the Church.

He always saw himself as a servant of God and a servant of the Church. His love for the Church made him dedicate his entire life to the defense and promotion of Orthodoxy, the time tested teaching of the Church, the Magisterium.

As I said earlier, some of his critics saw it as conservatism. I believe that such conservatism was needed if the Church was to retain her identity, and not become a caricature of what Christ and the Apostles intended her to be.

I would like to propose that we follow the example of Pope Benedict in his love for the Church. We too should love our Church to the extent that we will defend and promote all that she stands for. We should avoid every tendency to water down the traditional teaching of the Church on matters of faith and morals in the name of some misguided modernity.

The Church must indeed respond to modern realities in order to be relevant, but not in such a way as to surrender her essential doctrine and practice founded on Sacred Scripture and the equally Sacred Tradition.

14: What he teaches us: Knowing when to quit

One more lesson that I believe we can learn from Pope Benedict is knowing when to quit. Pope Benedict shocked everyone when he decided to resign from the Papacy. But he was just being honest, honest to God, to the Church, and to himself. He knew that his physical and emotional strength could no longer carry the burden of day-to-day running of the affairs of the Church. He did not want the Church to be adversely affected by his condition. He decided to quit the Papacy,

something that no other Pope had done in 600 years. That was another demonstration of his love for the Church.

15. The Church should not suffer because of his personal ambition to cling to power. Many of us need to learn this all-important lesson from Pope Benedict. When your body and your mind tell you that you are no longer equal to the demands of a particular office, then, for goodness sake, let go. Don't insist on occupying that office, whether you are equal to it or not. If you do, you are selfish. You don't care about the people that you are supposed to be serving. You don't love them. You only love yourself. And you will die loving yourself. I believe that our African political leaders, in particular, need to learn this lesson. They should stop imposing themselves on people when they themselves know and everyone else knows that they are physically, emotionally, intellectually and morally incapable of occupying an office. Public office is not your birthright. Nobody owes it to you. Get that into your head, and get out! Learn from Pope Benedict.

16. In conclusion, let us once again thank God for the gift that Pope Benedict was to the Catholic Church and to humanity. May his monumental legacy continue to serve the best interests of the Church and humanity long into the future. Let us also pray that God will have mercy on his soul, and give him a place of light, happiness and peace, in the fellowship of the Saints in heaven, through Christ our Lord. Amen.