

## **“Benedict XVI: I Accept”**

Homily, April 24, 2005  
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In spite of all the anticipation this week around the Conclave of Cardinals at the Vatican, and then at last the dramatic white smoke on Tuesday, and the announcement of great joy “Habemus Papam” (“We have a pope”), Joseph Card. Ratzinger, from Germany, who has chosen the name Benedict XVI, and his first appearance and words to the throng and to the world, “Dear brothers and sisters, after the great Pope John Paul II, the cardinals have elected me—a simple, humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord”... in spite of all of this, none of us was there at the moment he became pope.

It was not the moment when the ballots for him reached two-thirds of the cardinal electors. It came after that, when in response to the question of a Cardinal, “Do you accept your canonical election as supreme pontiff?” he replied, “Accepto” (I accept). Not until that little word, “I accept,” was he pope, but with that word he was already pope, still without name, but pope for life.

We can only imagine how he must have felt, his life completely changed and definitively so, a sense of complete personal inadequacy, a never-anticipated weight of responsibility, a grace, a joy, tears, a smile, hope, fear as he picked a name, was clothed in white, honored by the cardinals, and whisked out to the throng. “I accept”... pope! What made him pope was a word of freedom, a free acceptance. No one laid hands on him to make him pope, but he must have looked up to the risen Christ in the center of Michelangelo’s Last Judgment, Christ extending his hands over all humanity of all time. That was the only kind of laying on of hands that was possible, a blessing hand, a supporting hand, a hand reaching out as if touching him on the shoulder to say “thanks” for his “I accept.”

But this “I accept” is not just the word that made Joseph Ratzinger to be Pope Benedict XVI, as he now is, it is also the little word that has made us to be who we are. It is the same “I do” of our baptism; the same “I do” of our marriages; the same “I am ready and willing”

of my being a priest; the same “Amen” (“so be it”) of our receiving today the Body and Blood of the Lord. At the center of our lives too is an “I accept”, “I do.” So, there was also this little word at the center for Mary’s life when she said “Let it be done to me according to your will”—i.e. “I accept”. It was at the center of Jesus’ life and his becoming Redeemer, when he whispered in the garden, “Not my will be done, but thine be done”—i.e. “I accept”.

The pope has accepted, what do we accept? We accept being church. Jesus, the Living Stone—the one on which even Peter the rock is built up—invites us: “Come to me like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through me”. For us, to be living stones in the Living Stone is to be church. Yes, we the church last like stone and cannot be shaken—because we are built on Christ, but unlike any stones we know, we are living, because we are built on Christ who is Living, so though we as church cannot be shaken, we do move, grow, live, breathe, love, dance, change. That’s why, after all, we as church have and need a new pope. He had to say his “I accept” to be pope; we need to say our “I accept” to be church.

We should note that the pope’s “I accept” is essentially an “I accept to serve the church; I accept to be the servant of the servants of God.” He accepts to serve us. So, in that sense we were there at the moment he became pope as the beloved object of his “I accept” — the subjects of his ministry. Hey, not bad, the pope accepts to serve us, to minister to us. So all the fanfare was as much about us as about him. Congratulations to all of us!

The pope’s ministry, as is made clear today in the ministry of the Twelve, is, and I quote them, “to devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” That’s rather stunning really. In effect, all else can be delegated, entrusted to others, but the indispensable, non-transferable service to the church, to us, of the successors of the Twelve, the pope and bishops, is devotion to prayer and dedication to the ministry of the word. The second may require a world stage; the first needs only a private room and a Eucharistic community. May we—as the spiritual house of living stones built on Christ the Living Stone—be supported by Pope Benedict XVI’s prayer and hear anew in our day the gospel in his ministry of the word.

As he accepted to be pope, we accept to be church. But is there something even more fundamental to which we say, “I accept”? Yes there is, and in this we are at one with all people, not just the church. This is why Jesus says today, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” Our most fundamental “I accept,” the most sacred “I do” of them all, our response to our primary vocation from God—as it is for all people—is our response to the voice of life itself: “I accept”. Not so much “I choose” or “I make or create,” but more humbly and humanly, “I accept.” I accept my conception and birth; I accept my parents and family; I accept my history; I accept change and suffering; I accept my reality and identity; I accept where and with whom I have been placed; I accept the mystery of life; I accept my truth; I accept God’s truth written not in a book but in life itself; I accept conscience and the call to compassion; I accept my one life in one world yet linked with all lives in the whole word; I accept my complicity in sin and evil; I accept the call and the consternations of loving; I accept life’s horizon of wonder and terror and presence; I accept diminishment and death.

Indeed, the biggest, scariest, holiest, most responsibility-giving, most transforming, most bending, bowing, and humbling, “I accept,” is not in God’s eyes the one of the pope this week, but the “I accept life” of each of us everyday, always. This is where the Holy abides with us. The pope and the church of living stones, prayer and the ministry of the word, even—and I can hardly say it—Jesus himself the Living Stone, are for the sake of this “I accept,” for they are all for the sake of life, our life and the life of all, now and always. No wonder Jesus said, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” The church is a spiritual house of living stones built on Jesus Christ the Living Stone, but it is only the porch, unenclosed and windswept, of the “Father’s house.”

At the funeral for Pope John Paul II, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in his homily told the crowd gathered in St. Peter’s Square under the window where John Paul II so often spoke and last appeared, “He stands now at the window in his Father’s house and he sees and blesses us.” Today we have a new pope because he has said, “I accept.” After being chosen a pope, he said about John Paul II: “I seem to feel his strong hand squeezing mine; I seem to see his smiling eyes and listen to his words, addressed particularly to me in this moment: ‘Do not be afraid!’” he said. We too, as church, say “I accept,” and as living persons, say “I accept:” life for what it now is, and life in the many dwelling places of our Father’s house for what it will be.