

A pope from the abyss

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What is the significance of a German pope? And why has he chosen the name Benedict XVI? This article examines the background to the new head of the Roman Catholic Church.

IN REVELATION 17:8 the origin of the beast that will be extant at the return of Christ is shown: "The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit". The phrase "bottomless pit" translates the single Greek word *abussos*, and has the sense of an uncharted and unknown territory. At the time John was writing, the political abyss indicated by the "bottomless pit" in Revelation 17 was the unconquered lands in Europe north of the Roman Empire.¹ One of the main countries in this area today is Germany. We would therefore expect to see countries such as Germany becoming increasingly prominent within the European beast of the abyss.

The election of the German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI has brought Germany into the religious spotlight. His election has been described by the German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder as a "great honour for Germany".² When he was pope, John Paul II furthered the cause of his native Poland, another country of the "abyss". It will be interesting to see to what extent Benedict XVI furthers the cause of his native country. He has already announced that his first foreign visit will be to Germany.

The beast in Revelation 17 is European, and the appointment of Ratzinger is potentially significant, not only for Germany but also for Europe as a whole. This significance might well be hinted at in the name he has chosen. As the reporter Duncan Campbell commented: "The choice of the name Benedict by the new Pope could be symbolic of his desire to emphasise the importance of Europe in his papacy as St Benedict is the patron saint of Europe".³

As well as alluding to St Benedict, the pope may also be harking back to Benedict XV. He reigned during the First World War and he strove to achieve a peaceful solution to that war. He also had a role in developments which eventually led to the formation of the League of Nations. As Campbell further comments: "Some commentators saw the choice [of name] as linking with Ben-

edict XV's first world war efforts and a possible attempt to continue his immediate predecessor's anti-war stance". If this is true then perhaps the new pope will have a role in furthering the cry of "Peace and safety" (1 Thess. 5:3) at the time of the end.



Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI

Ratzinger is a conservative who is expected to provide continuity. From 1981 he was Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, responsible for defending church orthodoxy. He has been accused of seeking ruthlessly to silence dissidents within the Catholic Church, and as a consequence he has both admirers and critics. As one newspaper reported prior to his election, "To his critics he is an intimidating enforcer, punishing liberal thinkers. Ratzinger is seen by others, however, as a potential intellectual saviour for the church during a time of confusion and compromise".⁴

Pope Benedict XVI is aged 78. Furthermore, the pope prior to John Paul II, John Paul I, died only thirty-three days after his election. It would be foolish to try to predict what the legacy of Benedict XVI will be. However, whatever happens in the future, his election has reminded Catholics that their religion is European and rooted in an orthodoxy which its rulers do not intend to change.

1. For a more detailed consideration see Bernard, N., "[The beast of the abyss takes shape](#)", *The Testimony*, Nov. 2002, pp. 407-8.
2. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4462503.stm>.
3. Campbell, D. (2005), "Choice of name hints at anti-war stance", *The Guardian*, 20 Apr. 2005, p. 3.
4. Morgan, C. and Follain, J. (2005), "Radical Brazilian archbishop leads race to claim throne of St Peter", *Sunday Times*, 3 Apr., p. 2.