

In 1932, when he was 5 years of age, Joseph Ratzinger, the man who would one day become pope, had a chance to see Michael Cardinal von Faulhaber, who was the Archbishop of Munich. He visited the small town in Bavaria where the Ratzinger family lived, and apparently the young man was rather impressed with the vestments the cardinal wore, according to his brother. He was a part of a group to present the cardinal with flowers, and later that day he announced to his family that he would be a cardinal too.

Call it an early epiphany if you will as he discerned his vocation, but apparently the calling never left him. By 15 he once said "I'll be a bishop someday" to which his cousin said "well if then why not pope too?"

In his teens, he had been in the minor seminary until it was closed by the Nazis, the teens sent home, the seminary used by the military. He was forced into the Hitler Youth, but apparently a sympathetic math teacher allowed him to avoid going to meetings, who said come to one meeting, we'll get you a document, and then you don't have to ever come again." This anti-Nazi sentiment came from his family; his father was very

outspoken against them, and it required the family to move to a village at the foot of the Alps.

He'd be drafted and released a few different times, eventually deserting near the war's end as he was fed up with the evil of the Nazis, who actually killed his cousin, taking him away because he had Down Syndrome and murdered as part of Hitler's eugenics program. When he made it back to his house and two members of the SS were given lodging there, he didn't keep his frustration and anger at Hitler a secret; amazingly the two SS men vanished without taking any action against the Ratzingers, and he later said in his memoirs, "A special angel seemed to be guarding us."

When US troops rolled into the village, he was identified as a soldier, and put back on the uniform he had abandoned, and was sent to a POW camp briefly.

Still, the desire for priesthood was in his heart, and he and his brother went to seminary later in 1945, ordained in 1951. He'd get his PhD in 1953, and wrote a book on Saint Bonaventure's theology, and then would be a

teacher. In the 1960s, he was instrumental at helping prepare the documents for Vatican II.

Though known to us as the Council that allowed for vernacular languages to be spoken at Mass, the Council did much more; Pope Saint John XXIII called the council after having his own epiphany, sensing the Spirit was telling him now was the time to have a breath of fresh air let into the Church. At the Council, Ratzinger wrote many of the documents, and was seen as progressive. But right after the council, he also became concerned that progressivism might take the Church in going beyond what the Council envisioned and compromise Catholic integrity; as such, he became a sport of “spiritual umpire” for the debates that would happen in the Church in coming years. He was concerned we might grow in numbers, but that people wouldn’t have a deeper spirituality and the faith needed to really take root in the soul; which is why he’d spend so much of his time writing essays and books, including a theological journal with other theologians in the early 70s and later, perhaps most famously his work “Jesus of Nazareth, because he cared deeply about helping people understand who Jesus is.

By the late 70s he became Archbishop of Munich, and took as his motto John 3:8: "Fellow Worker in the Truth," and then became cardinal the same year, serving in the 80s as the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (turning down one invite early to head the Congregation for Catholic Education). During his time here, he'd help safeguard the Catholic faith, but he'd also help hammer out the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, a document signed with the Lutheran World Federation in 1999 that nearly collapsed were it not for his intervention, which holds we believe grace saves us; and frankly puts to rest much of the criticisms of Martin Luther.

He also had his hands full knowing he had to confront things the Church was going through. According to a New York Times report upon his accession to the papacy in 2005, Cardinal Ratzinger had made a weekly practice of reading through dossiers on accused priests, a practice he referred to as "our Friday penance." An Associated Press review of Vatican records in 2014 dates Ratzinger's procedural improvements to 2001, stating that they show a "remarkable evolution in the Holy See's in-house procedures to discipline pedophiles." The AP continued, "Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger took action after determining that bishops around the

world weren't following church law to put accused clerics on trial in church tribunals." Between 2011 and 2012 alone, Pope Benedict laicized nearly 400 priests. By one estimate, he was responsible for the laicization of more than 800 priests between 2004 and 2014, and he disciplined many more. He met with numerous victims around the world as well.

In 2005 when John Paul II died, he later admitted praying that he would not be chosen pope; but he also surrendered to the will of God, saying Lord if this is how you want me to serve you I will do it. He'd go on to write, as pope over the next 8 years, about how God is love and how we can in turn love God and then write about hope, stressing our lives do not end in death and the impact hope has on the present. His goal was to rekindle faith in the world where he saw so many thinking God was no longer necessary. In his words at World Youth Day in 2005, he said "In vast areas of the world today, there is a strange forgetfulness of God. It seems as if everything would be just the same even without him." And in his final will, he urged the faithful to "stand firm in the faith."

A man of deep faith, he preferred Mozart, the company of cats, (in fact a children's book was written from the perspective of his cat on his life) and

going to the Swiss Alps and writing as opposed to being in the limelight. But throughout his life, because of his profound spirituality, all of the decisions he made to serve the Church were the result of his being open to the will of God. In fact when he stepped down in 2013, shocking everyone, I remember reading at the time that this too was part of something revealed to him in his prayers - that now was the time for a change in the papacy.

What his life goes to show you is how he was a man who was constantly open to the will of God; someone who was extremely thoughtful and took the time to listen to God in his life, specifically if you will someone who saw the signs or the epiphanies; the messages that God was giving him, and then he acted on him.

As we come to Epiphany today, we celebrate the arrival of the Magi to visit Jesus; the wise men from the east. The word comes from a Greek word meaning something has appeared but something unique; something intense. The Magi like all of us are searchers; they see this sign, the star, and are guided by it and then make the long journey.

What this feast invites us to do is to look at our own lives, which so often become routine and filled with things we don't think about. There's the mundane things like shaving and doing housework, eating, sleeping; the entertainment like movies or hobbies; but on our journey, we want to take a moment every so often and look at the stars (both literally and metaphorically) but also pay attention to moments we have where we may get a sudden "wow, God" moment - a powerful thing that speaks to us of the nature of God, and His plans for us.

For Pope Benedict, those moments where discerning God was calling him to be a priest even as a child; he sensed this beauty at Mass and in what priests did; it was the moment where he realized he had to be bold and stand up to the Nazis as his father did; where he had to help take the Church in a new direction, but also defend the Church knowing this would cause some of his brother bishops and priests to dislike him; knowing he had to trust in the Spirit who helped choose him, and then trust again when he would shock the world by stepping down, the first pope to do so in 600 years. None of what he did was done quickly or suddenly; rather all of it was from his deep spirituality, and then there was the difficulty of the mission.

In my own life, I think of these epiphanies if you will.

There was my own journey to priesthood, thinking it about it as a child, being involved as a catechist at my parish in the late 90s, worrying excessively about the decision and having two moments that clinched it - one being a peaceful "it will be OK" moment as I prayed at the Cathedral before the Sacred Heart shrine prior to an informational dinner; the second calling three times to talk to the vice rector and say "I just can't do this right now" in a moment of panic only to get voice mail three times, and not wanting to leave a message of "I'm not coming" realizing I just needed to stop freaking out and let go and let God.

There were moments where I felt the peace of God and his love, reminding me that He is there and I was in the right place. I think of the first really tough funeral I had - a 17 year old figure skater named Leslie who lost her cancer battle, and the love that I felt in the church for her family shown by the hundreds of young people there that day.

I think of going alone a few years into my priesthood on a South Dakota adventure, late in the summer when there were fewer travelers, and being alone hiking up Harney Peak in South Dakota's Custer Park, meeting a woman who had recently been to Lourdes and sharing her faith story with me, and seeing the clouds all around me, hearing a distant train whistle, and feeling God all around me; and the next day driving to Devil's Tower and being there alone at sunset as a deer stopped in front of me for a few seconds to pose for a picture. In this moment, I was again comforted, knowing God is all around me and what an amazing God He is.

I think of sitting in the hospital room when my grandma Pat had been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer and was transitioning to hospice, and seeing her face filled with peace and calm; sharing her love for me and all of the family, and of her hope that we'd have a good life ahead. As someone who is admittedly fearful of death or what the future can hold, I'm reminded that I too can face my Good Friday without fear, and I think of her and of her in that moment, but also in how she lived caring so deeply for the people around her and I strive to do the same.

I think of the first time I met Kirby, wanting a dog my whole life, now becoming a pastor living alone, and this 120 pound marsh mellow jumped up on me and non verbally said, “hey I think I should live with you” or of how a large golden retriever showed up in my life when I least expected it, and said to me with his eyes when we met “there seems to be some sadness in your heart, perhaps I can help you with that.”

All of us have moments like this; they come sometimes when we least expect them. But in them, God sends us different messages, and it's up to us to cherish these moments, to ponder them, to appreciate them, and read the stars if you will. God may be saying “it will be OK” or “it's time for a chance” or “this is going to be hard but you need to do this” and in our world that is so often go-go-go or filled with things that are entertainment/escapism, we need to make time for God and listen to Him and His messengers, and when we sense we have a “wow God” moment, think about it more deeply. Or maybe you've had these moments and need to look back as you pray and say “okay, I think God was trying to tell me this” and never forget God manifests Himself to us in many ways.

And through it all, like Benedict, like the Magi, we go on our mission. The Magi had many earthly treasures and comforts, but they sensed something was missing. They knew that true happiness came from God. And they set out on their mission. A younger Joseph Ratzinger may very well have been able to have a quieter life, perhaps spending more time in the Alps or playing the piano then writing, speaking, and leading. But he knew he had a job to do, one that he didn't always want to do, and one that would have such difficulties, but one he needed to do. So how about us? Listening to the voice of God, and discerning that I'm called to be a parent, I'm called to take this job, I'm called to face this difficult situation, whatever it might be, it's often tough. We remember God is with us, but God also sends us, as he sent the Magi, and as He'll send the apostles. As we put away the Christmas decorations and go into the new year and ordinary time, we all know ahead on the journey that we make, there will be difficulties. And it may be tempting to quit. But God wants us to go on a mission. He had bigger things in store for Benedict than looking at mountains, something I love to do too. And whatever we are called to do, we can't be afraid to get to work and keep at it seeing the mission through knowing God will help us do just that.

In some places, there's a tradition of the Deacon announcing through chant the date of Easter and having the Paschal Candle out for Epiphany using the melody of the Exultet. It's a reminder to us of where we are journeying towards - Jesus and heaven, and the last words of Benedict were reported to have been "Lord, I love you." A man who died knowing God was with him and welcoming him home; a man who knew he'd face God one day and prepared for that by listening to what God wanted him to do and carrying out his mission. What a gift we are given in our Lord, and He asks us not for gold, frankincense or myrrh but rather wants us to give ourselves Him. May we be attentive to the epiphanies in our lives and, together with our Lord, carry out our mission.