

Meet Benedict XVI: Shy, Orderly, Funny

By IAN FISHER

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VATICAN CITY, April 23 - The new pope, Benedict XVI, introduced himself on Saturday to the world's news media, and if he was upset about hard-edged headlines that focused on his years as enforcer of the faith, he did not show it.

"I know how hard you have worked," he told several hundred reporters, smiling through an address delivered in flawless Italian, English, French and his native tongue, German. "Far away from your homes and families, for long hours and in sometimes difficult circumstances."

He did not take questions or deviate far from his script (which did not include Spanish, irritating the reporters who write for millions of Spanish-speaking Roman Catholics). But, with his gold glasses slightly askew, he seemed serene and at ease in his new role as the 265th pope. He did not chide or lay down harsh truths as he did on Monday when the conclave began, warning direly of a "dictatorship of relativism."

It was his first public audience, the day before he will be formally installed as pope on St. Peter's Square, and it posed again the issue the very same reporters in the audience have been trying to resolve: How a man, the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 78, with so fierce a reputation and so long a record of unstinting orthodoxy can also be, by nearly all accounts, courteous, humble, warm if not effusive, and even shy?

The issue - that the pope be loved as well as obeyed - is one that the Vatican is well aware of, and the church's media machine has been working to soften his image in these last few days. Many friends have thus been happy to provide details they say underscore his essential modesty: His fondness for lemonade and cats, for example, or a democratic way of running meetings, soliciting advice starting from the lowliest in the office.

And at a time when many Roman Catholics would like nothing more than a pleasant public honeymoon for their contentious new leader, the private image does seem very real, too - and one that Catholics will perhaps warm up to, even if he seems unlikely to be as beloved as his predecessor and former boss, John Paul II.

John L. Allen Jr., a writer for The National Catholic Reporter, recalled meeting him for the first time at a cocktail party in 1997 in San Francisco. The second most powerful man in the Roman Catholic church was definitely not holding court.

"He was just sort of off in a corner," said Mr. Allen, who was working on a biography, later called "Cardinal Ratzinger" (Continuum: 2000). "And I remember going up and introducing myself to him. I was just bowled over, first of all how shy he was. And secondly, he had a kind of dry sense of humor and just how nice he seemed."

"This certainly was not what his public image would lead you to expect," he said.

From his first few appearances, including the one on Saturday in Paul VI auditorium in the Vatican, it seems clear that he will not be as dynamic as John Paul II, who as a young man was an actor. Joseph Ratzinger pursued a more solitary art, the piano. On Saturday, he wandered from his script only to joke briefly about switching from one language to the next.

"We're in Italy, so let's return to Italian," he said after reading sections of his speech in English, German and French (the French speakers in the audience applauded him).

When he stood to take the microphone after delivering his speech, he did not greet reporters by name or make the sort of impromptu remarks that John Paul might have in his healthier days. Benedict went directly into the Lord's Prayer.

But he was smiling, congenial - and orderly. Colleagues and friends say a sense of order may also be a hallmark of this new pontificate, though detractors worry, too, that it might too much resemble rigid traditionalism. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, archbishop of Genoa, who worked for 20 years with Cardinal Ratzinger, said movers were transferring his enormous collection of books from his apartment just outside the Vatican into the papal apartments - in the exact same order.

The order, however, does not seem a sign of personal rigidity, friends say. He rarely shows anger. He is reserved, they say, even shy, but approachable and informal.

"Those who describe him as cold, detached, inaccessible and too intellectual have not met him," wrote Alessandra Borghese, an Italian noblewoman, describing dinner with him in 2004.

"He didn't seem tired but quite amused," she wrote. "His glass was filled with his favorite 'wine': lemonade." Quoting him, she wrote: "In my rhythm of work, and the necessity always to be very lucid, I do not even allow myself a glass of wine. I get up at 6 in the morning, though I used to get up earlier years ago. After Mass, meditation and the breviary, my day does not allow a moment of pause: meetings, conferences, texts to review, documents to sign."

The new pope is not, however, a teetotaler: Cardinal Bertone said he occasionally allows himself a glass of "excellent" wine from Piedmont. Manuela Macher, co-owner of the Cantina Tirolese, a Bavarian restaurant near the Vatican where he is a regular, said he also liked an occasional German beer, Franziskaner Weissbier. Which raises a question: Does he order the large size or the small?

"No, no - the small," she said. "Or orange juice."

Ms. Macher said he was modest, not at all showy for a man of his position, with a dry sense of humor.

"Someone lost his dog and put up a sign: Has anyone seen this German Shepherd?" she recalled. "He came in and said, 'No, no, it's not me. I'm here.' It was really funny - it surprised us. I think he is going to surprise us."

Of all the issues surrounding the early days of this papacy - and the man who will be installed formally on Sunday as the successor to St. Peter - Cardinal Bertone said his friends are curious about one detail in particular.

"One question we've all asked ourselves is whether he'll bring his piano to the Vatican," Cardinal Bertone said. "I'd like to hear the pope playing Bach or Mozart."

Elisabetta Povoledo of The International Herald Tribune and Jason Horowitz and Daniel J. Wakin contributed reporting for this article.