

# Gerard O’Connell - Pope Francis opens up about Benedict XVI, past conclaves and more, in new book



No pope in history has spoken about his relationship with his predecessor, but that is what Pope Francis does in a fascinating new interview book entitled *El Sucesor, mis recuerdos de Benedicto XVI* (**The Successor: My Memories of Benedict XVI**). He not only reveals hitherto unknown aspects of his relationship with the pope emeritus, but also speaks about what happened in the conclaves of 2005 which elected Benedict and 2013 when he was elected.

“We ate together here [in Santa Marta, where Francis lives] and in Mater Ecclesiae [where Benedict lived],” “we prayed together” and “we talked about everything,” Pope Francis tells Javier Martinez Brocal. Mr. Brocal is a Spanish journalist and correspondent for Spain's ABC daily newspaper; he interviewed the pope on three occasions in the second half of 2023 and early 2024 for the 238-page book, currently only available in Spanish, published on 3 April.

It is clear from this book that Pope Francis wanted to give his own personal account of his relationship with Benedict XVI, especially the exchanges between them from the day of his election on March 13, 2013, to the day of his predecessor's death, Dec. 31, 2022. It appears he did not want that unique story to be told by others, least of all by Archbishop Georg Ganswein, the private secretary of the eighth German pope, whose book *Who Believes Is Not Alone: My Life Beside Benedict XVI*, published on the day of Benedict's funeral, with excerpts released at the time of his death, grieved Francis. The Argentine pope says he “felt pain” that Benedict “was being used” in this way and describes the publication of the book at that time as “a lack of nobility and of humanity.” Moreover, “To publish a book that lays into me on the day of the funeral, telling things that are not true, is very sad,” Francis remarks to Mr. Brocal.

In the interview Pope Francis speaks with great admiration and esteem for his predecessor, describing a positive coexistence between the emeritus pope and a pope in office. He characterizes Benedict as “a holy man,” “a contemplative,” “a gentle man” and “an authentic pastor.” He “was a meek man, and some took advantage of that,” Francis says, but “he was also strong, not weak; he was humble, he did not impose himself, and so he suffered.”

Pope Francis says he first got to know Joseph Ratzinger “through his writings,” recalling that, as a theologian, Ratzinger was the first to raise the question of “reform” at the Second Vatican Council. He shares how he read some of Ratzinger's “very profound texts” in *Communio*, an international theological review, and described his theology as “open.” He reveals that as archbishop of Buenos Aires, “every time I went to Rome, I went to visit him at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith” and on different occasions asked his advice, once about a nomination and at another time about the abuse question.

Francis remembers his predecessor “as a courageous man” and recalls that when, as prefect of the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger attended a meeting in the Vatican's Secretariat of State to discuss the case of Marcel Maciel, the priest founder of the Legionaries of Christ who was being accused of abuse; when he returned to his office, Ratzinger said, “the other side won,” meaning they blocked the path to investigation. But Ratzinger “was a fighter who didn’t throw in the towel” and “did what he thought was right.”

Starting in the congregation that he headed, Francis says, he began “to clean up” the abuse scandal. Later, as pope, Benedict dealt swiftly with Father Maciel and the Legionaries.

As cardinal-prefect of the doctrine office and as pope, “Ratzinger was a man who acted with great freedom,” Francis says. As emeritus pope, “He let me grow in freedom to take decisions,” the pope adds. “He never interfered. He never ceased to support me.” He says Benedict told him, “I support you. Maybe I don’t understand, but I support you.”

Francis also reveals that the pope emeritus supported him when “some cardinals once asked him to put me on trial,” accusing Francis of heresy because of his support for civil unions of gay couples, but that Benedict told them: “That is not heresy.”

### *The Election of Pope Benedict*

In the book, Francis also tells Mr. Brocal about the 2005 conclave that elected Cardinal Ratzinger and the 2013 conclave in which Francis was elected pope. Significantly, he prefaces his remarks by stating that, “The cardinals take an oath not to reveal what happens during the conclave, but popes have license to talk.”

The pope, commenting on the 2005 conclave in which he was the runner-up, reveals that he discovered he was “being used” then “to block” the election of Cardinal Ratzinger. The cardinals voted for then-Cardinal Bergoglio, and by the third ballot he had received 40 votes, a number sufficient to block Ratzinger’s election. If they had kept on voting for him, he said Ratzinger would have withdrawn, but then the cardinals would likely have coalesced around another candidate because, as he learned later, they did not want “a foreigner” (that is, a non-Italian) as pope. However, when Cardinal Bergoglio understood the manoeuvre, he says, he told the Colombian Cardinal Dario Castrillón Hoyos, “Don't play with my candidacy, I won't go along with it. Abandon me.”

Subsequently, many cardinals changed their vote, and Ratzinger was elected in the fourth ballot. “He was my candidate!” Francis reveals. His reason: “At that moment, he was the only one who could be pope,” because after a dynamic, initiative-taking, globetrotting papacy like that of John Paul II, there was a need for “a pope who would maintain a healthy equilibrium, a pope of transition.” Francis said that it was clear that the Holy Spirit was the protagonist at the conclave.

Looking back, Francis says he felt that if someone like him “who stirs things up” had been elected, that person “would not have been able to do anything” as pope. Benedict, on the other hand, was a man who brought “a new style,” he says, “but it was not easy for him, he encountered much resistance in the Vatican.”

Francis recalls that when he was archbishop of Buenos Aires “some in the Roman Curia were against me in an exaggerated way,” so much so that in 2011 — when he submitted his letter of resignation as required by canon law upon reaching the age of 75 — some in the then-Congregation for Bishops had already arranged that Benedict should accept his resignation immediately, and that they had the name of his successor ready for the pope to consider, Francis says. When, however, Cardinal Marc Ouellet, the then-prefect of the congregation, took the letter to Benedict XVI, “the pope took it in his hand and waved it” and remarked, “I don’t know why Cardinal Bergoglio has so many enemies here!” Benedict rejected Bergoglio’s resignation, Francis says, and told Ouellet, “Let's give him another two years!”

On Oct. 14, 2005, Benedict defied opposition from within the Vatican and decided to attend the opening of the Latin American Bishops’ Conference in Aparecida, Brazil, at the invitation of three Latin American cardinals, among them the-then Cardinal Bergoglio.



In his address to the assembly on May 13, 2007, Benedict warmly greeted all participants, Pope Francis recalls, and “opened many doors.”

“Each pope shapes the papacy with his own style,” Francis admits. Benedict’s papacy was marked by a prayerful “theology [done] on his knees” and “contemplation.” He will be remembered for his invaluable trilogy on the life of Jesus, Francis says, but above all for his decision to resign which, “was a decision thought out before God, and very responsible for a man who does not want to make a mistake and leave the decision in the hands of others.” Benedict “resigned out of honesty,” Francis says. “He was a man not at all attached to power.”

When asked if Benedict was misunderstood as pope, Francis says: “All popes have a dimension of being misunderstood. A group in the [Roman] Curia made life impossible for John Paul II. I think in the case of Benedict they did not understand the internal freedom that he had.”

### *The Election of Pope Francis*

Responding to questions about the 2013 conclave, Francis reveals that while he received “some votes” in the first ballot on March 12 and “many votes” in the second and third ballots on the morning of March 13, he considered these as “holding votes” (“votos de depdsito”) to be transferred to someone else later in the conclave. He admitted he did not fully grasp the possibility of being elected pope until lunchtime on March 13, when a group of cardinals whom he did not know well began quizzing him about aspects of liberation theology.

It was only toward the end of lunch that he began to understand clearly what was happening, when Spanish Cardinal Santos Abril asked him if it was true that he had only one lung. He clarified that this was not true; he had part of his right lung removed in 1957 due to cysts. This rumor “was a last-minute maneuver” to block his election, Francis says. He also remembers that when some cardinals consulted Cardinal Angelo Scola, who was the other top contender for pope, Scola told them, “Vote for Bergoglio.”

After lunch, despite being aware of the possibility of his election, Francis nevertheless took his short siesta as usual, before entering the conclave where he would gain more votes on the fourth ballot. After a ballot that had to be repeated, because some cardinal mistakenly cast two voting slips, Francis was elected on the fifth ballot.

Francis does not reveal the voting tallies in the interview, but Mr. Brocal, the Spanish interviewer, reports the results of the voting presented in my book, *The Election of Pope Francis: An Inside Account of the Conclave that Changed History* (Orbis Books, 2019), which reveals that Francis received 26 votes on the first ballot and 85 on the final ballot.

Francis admits to Mr. Brocal that he had not prepared the speech he gave from the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica when he greeted the people for the first time as pope. “I hadn't thought it through beforehand,” he says. “It just came out!”

Pope Francis then recalls his first phone conversation with Benedict after his election and reveals fascinating details about his first meeting with Benedict at Castel Gandolfo on March 23, 10 days after his election. They prayed together “as brothers,” the pope says, kneeling side by side in the chapel. Then, he says, Benedict took him to the sitting room where he gave him the box containing the documentation from the investigation of the Vatileaks scandal, which Francis described as a “twisted operation.” “[Benedict] told me everything,” the pope continues. “He had removed this one [who was involved], and changed that one, and so on.” His predecessor then “suggested” he remove others, Francis says, which he did in due course.

Reflecting on the transition from Benedict as pope to himself, the Argentine emphasizes that in the history of the papacy, and certainly since Leo XIII, there has always been an element of “continuity” and of “difference.” He reveals that he and Benedict “talked about everything,” and often Benedict would “broaden the field [of discussion],” and this “helped me make a good decision.” Benedict “never said, ‘I do not agree,’” Francis says, but he admits that he never talked with Benedict about “*Traditionis Custodes*,” the apostolic letter promulgated in July 2021, through which he placed major restrictions on the celebration of the Latin Mass and the sacraments in the pre-Vatican II rite.

Pope Francis reveals that he has kept “all the correspondence” he received from Benedict.

Francis also reveals how he asked Archbishop Georg Ganswein, Benedict's personal secretary, to take “a voluntary leave” from his role as prefect of the papal household following the publication of Cardinal Robert Sarah's book, *From the Depths of our Hearts*, that had allegedly been co-written with Benedict. The book sought to prevent any change to the obligation of celibacy for priests in the Roman Catholic church that was being discussed at the Amazon synod. Benedict later distanced himself from the book, and Francis places the blame for the debacle on Ganswein. Francis said that having observed the influential role that Benedict's collaborators played, he decided “to dissolve the papal secretariat,” the position Ganswein had held, because “it is not good to have an all-powerful secretary.”

Regarding the book's author, Cardinal Sarah, Francis says, “Maybe I made a mistake to name Sarah to the Congregation for Divine Worship, where he was manipulated by separatist groups.” He describes Sarah as a “good, austere, and prayerful man” and added, “I sometimes feel his work in the [Roman] Curia left him a little bitter.”

Pope Francis also talks at some length in the book about how he has exercised the papacy since his election, and some of the decisions he has made that stirred things up. “A pope cannot be static,” he remarks, “To be faithful to the church means to be open to dialogue.” Again, he confirmed that while the possibility of resignation is always open, especially after the resignation of Benedict, “for the moment I do not see the necessity.”

