

As Pope Francis prepares to preside over the funeral of the late Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI on Thursday, 5 January, several remarks from early in his pontificate offer a portrait of his German-born predecessor.

No sooner had Jorge Bergoglio been elected Pope when some of his first words right at the beginning of his pontificate were addressed to Benedict XVI. While [greeting the crowd](#) from the central loggia of the Vatican Basilica, Pope Francis said:

“First of all, I would like to offer a prayer for our Bishop Emeritus, Benedict XVI. Let us pray together for him, that the Lord may bless him and that Our Lady may keep him.”

‘A great Pope’

“Benedict XVI: a great Pope”: Pope Francis thus defined Benedict XVI on 27 October 2014 during the inauguration of a bust in honour of the Pope Emeritus at the Papal Academy of Sciences.

During his [speech](#), Pope Francis remembered his predecessor as:

“Great in strength and intellectual insight, great in his significant contribution to theology, great in his love for the Church and for human beings, great in his virtue and his religiosity.”

‘Man of God at service of the Church’

Many are the times that Pope Francis has spoken of his predecessor in terms of affection, gratitude and respect.

For example, on 28 July 2013, returning from his Apostolic Journey to Brazil, Pope Francis responded thus to journalists who asked him during the [press conference](#) on the return flight about his relationship with Benedict XVI:

He is a man of God, a humble man, a man of prayer. I was so happy when he was elected Pope. Also, when he resigned, for me it was an example of greatness. A great man. Only a great man does this!

Then he explained very simply and directly what having the late Ratzinger near to him means:

“It’s like having your grandfather in the house’, a wise grandfather... When I went to talk with him about that big problem, Vatileaks, he told me everything with great simplicity... to be helpful.”

His resignation: a holy and humble act

Two months later, on 20 September 2013, during an [interview](#) granted to Fr Anthony Spadaro, director of the Jesuit review *La Civiltà Cattolica*, Pope Francis spoke again about the resignation of his predecessor, defining it “an act of holiness, greatness, humility”.

And a year later, on 11 February 2014, on the first anniversary of that epochal event, Pope Francis [tweeted](#) on his account @Pontifex: “Today I invite you to pray together with me for His Holiness, Benedict XVI, a man of great courage and humility”. These 106 characters express his complete admiration for the pontificate of his predecessor.

Pope Emeritus is an institution, not a statue in a museum

Beyond this, however, Pope Francis has also often underlined another dimension of the Pope Emeritus, that is, his capacity to blaze an institutional trail.

He spoke about this concept on 18 August 2014, during the [press conference](#) on the return trip from his Apostolic Journey to Korea:

“I think that a Pope emeritus should not be an exception; after so many centuries, this is our first Pope emeritus... I believe that Pope Benedict XVI took this step which de facto instituted Popes emeriti. ... He opened a door which is institutional, not exceptional. Ours is really a relationship between brothers. I have also said that I feel as if I have a grandfather in the house for wisdom... I find it good for me to listen to him. He also encourages me a lot.”