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## German Atlantans proud of 'their' pope

But many leery of his views

Nadirah Sabir - For the Journal-Constitution  
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German-born Bibiana Perez of Woodstock home schools her five children and teaches at the German School of Atlanta. She met the future Pope Benedict XVI while studying philosophy and theology in Rome in her early 20s.

Her aunt was a nun who worked at Teutonic College, the German house where many priests and bishops live or stay when visiting the Vatican.

"I had a very short encounter with him in the late '80s after celebrating Mass," Perez said. Her aunt arranged for a visitor to take a picture with him. "He said, 'Take turns.' I still have that picture. I thought it was a kind gesture. It just shows that he thinks about people."

Generally, Germans living in Atlanta express pride in the new pontiff, former German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Deeper feelings depend on their impression of the man, the church and a strong desire to keep a clear line between matters of church and state.

The Rev. Hans Jorgen Hoeppeke, pastor of a German Lutheran ecumenical church in downtown Atlanta, said, "I think the Roman Catholic Church wants to continue the path of Pope John Paul II as guardian of the faith."

"He's the best man," Hoeppeke said. "He's certainly one who can unite the cardinals behind him. And I was ecstatic he was German."

'Very right wing'

"I was actually surprised," said Katrin Knospe, 30, of Vinings, a Protestant. "I would have expected someone who is younger, African or South American, from one of their largest growing areas. But people know him. For the country they are surprised and proud. He already has some kind of nickname: Papa Ratz instead of Pope Benedict."

"I knew of Ratzinger from way back in the '60s, when he was a relatively famous theologian," said Michael Nentwich, director of the Goethe Institute in Atlanta. "He swerved sharply to the right against the student movement when he was a professor, very right wing."

But Nentwich --- once a Catholic and now an atheist --- can't help but be proud. "He's the first pope from Germany in 1,000 years," he said.

Nentwich doesn't hold Ratzinger's conscription into the Hitler Youth, as a young teenager, against him. "But I would have hoped for a pope more progressive and who weighed in on issues facing the Catholic Church: condom use and AIDS in Africa, equality of the sexes."

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As the leader of an ecumenical congregation, Hoeppeke said, he doubts that Benedict will do much to further ecumenical relations. "He wrote the last encyclical. Other denominations aren't recognized."

Sieglinde Schneider, 52, of Buckhead said that, having been raised Catholic, she feels very connected. These days she's more ecumenical and hopes for a pope with a more "liberal, open view of other religions [denominations] to bring them together. We hope God has instilled the wisdom in him for his worldview, not just the Catholics."

In Germany, Hoeppeke said, reactions are mixed.

"Most cardinals weren't happy," he said. "Many Catholics are critical of the church. On the other hand, many are happy that at 78, he's an interim candidate."

Nentwich said the new pope will be there "until they figure out which direction to take."

"He's an old man," said Heike Siegmund, 41, of Marietta. "His age allows him to make some mistakes, meaning everything remains the same. . . . The key is the next pope."

Doing God's will

Esther Djokpe, 37, is a Catholic from Benin who married while studying in Germany. The couple and two young daughters live in Lilburn and attend Mass, spoken entirely in German, at Hoeppeke's church.

"I had expected the new pope to come from another continent, since most Catholics live outside Europe," Djokpe said through an interpreter. "Even if it wasn't Africa, but Latin America, India, . . . I was expecting the church to make a bigger jump into the future."

On Sunday, when the new pope was installed, Djokpe and others at the 5 p.m. Mass at German Church Atlanta, held at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer on Peachtree Street, expressed the desire for a pope more open to women's participation and ministry.

Klaus von Waldow, 40, a mechanical engineer who lives in Lawrenceville, said this pope will be good for the church in Europe because "the Christian belief in Germany is going backward."

"There's a lot of talk in the media that he's conservative, the women's rights groups, liberals," said von Waldow. "But the church is an institution. Women have never had the same rights as men. That's not the person, it's the church. . . . It's a good choice. The next one I hope is from South America. The majority of Catholics are living there."

"Those who are Catholic in Germany will be inspired, will listen more closely to what the pope has to say," said Udo Kohlmorgen, 43, a stay-at-home father in Grayson.

He said issues such as allowing priests to marry and divorced Catholics to remarry need to be addressed.

But Perez said the new pope "doesn't go by what the people say; he just wants to do God's will. I see how humble he is. I think that's just the most wonderful thing about him. Had there been another cardinal elected with the same attitude, I would have been just as happy."

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