



# Pope Benedict grants private audience to FSSP superiors: now the full report

*A Meeting with Benedict XVI: a Founding Member bears Witness* (kindly translated from the French by P.F. Counsell):

6<sup>th</sup> July 1988 – 6<sup>th</sup> July 2009. These two dates stand apart, on either side of a breach of twenty-one years, but the honour that graced each was the same — a meeting with the Holy Father.

In July 1988 I was, it so happened, one of the small number of priests who had arranged a meeting in Rome, not approving the illicit episcopal consecrations which had just taken place at Ecône on 30<sup>th</sup> June. On 3<sup>rd</sup> July, at four o'clock, we met the two Cardinals who were waiting to speak with us, one of them Augustin Cardinal Mayer, who had been named by Pope John Paul II as the President of the brand new Ecclesia Dei Commission. Beside him was Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and future Pope Benedict XVI. Spurred on by their fatherly encouragement, our dear Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter was then born.

During our stay in Rome, we expressed the desire to meet His Holiness Pope John Paul II so that we could let him know just how deeply grateful we were, and to assure him of our prayers. On Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> July, after each of us had offered Holy Mass at St. Peter's, we mustered at the Bronze Doors and from there we proceeded to the Courtyard of St. Damascus, where we would pay our respects to the Sovereign Pontiff before his Wednesday audience. We had just assumed our positions when someone arrived with a message from the Holy Father. He wanted five of us to go and meet him in his private apartments! By a remarkable token of Grace, I found myself amongst the five who had been chosen. And so it was that I was able to meet the Pope who, at the beginning of his reign, had spoken those heartening words to all Catholics: 'Do not be afraid!' The Pope I met was deeply grief-stricken; despite his best efforts, part of his flock was beginning to distance itself from the one true Fold, paying no heed to the voice of the Good Shepherd entreating them to remain within. But I also saw the heart of this very same Shepherd tenderly moved by those few sheep who refused to drift away. He called us 'his priests'. He gave us his blessing and assured us of his confidence. We went back home, overjoyed to be acting on behalf of the Church, to be carrying the Cross *with* the Church. The Fraternity of St. Peter had chosen its namesake well.



(Pope Benedict XVI at his desk with Fr John Berg, FSSP on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2009)

Twenty-one years on and I was sat in peace and quiet in front of my screen when suddenly my attention was caught by a message from the Mother House at Wigratzbad. It was a letter — in English! Despite my feeble understanding of the language, I gathered nonetheless that the letter had been sent to all the founding members of the Fraternity, and that it referred to a private audience with the Holy Father. To my relief, the attached official letter from the Papal Court was accompanied by another letter from our Secretary General, Fr. Evrat— this time in French. I understood then that our Superior General, Fr. Berg, had himself requested this audience for the founding members, for the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Fraternity. And his request was granted! But on this matter we had to keep strict silence; it is so rare a thing that Pope Benedict XVI grants a private audience that we had to keep it secret, not wishing to show any discourtesy towards the Holy Father. In granting the audience, he had demonstrated his confidence in us.

End of May. Thanks to some generous donations from some faithful in Bordeaux, as helpful as they were discreet, the plane tickets were booked. The Mother House took care of the accommodation in Rome. All the same, I'll admit it— a few days before I went, I let my family know. That got me a few heartfelt prayers offered up!

Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> July. Flew to Rome. The group of scouts which I lead was going off to camp on Monday 6<sup>th</sup>. I promised them I'd be there by Wednesday night. If only they knew!

Sunday, 6pm. Arrival in Fiumicino. Got into Rome in a jiffy, thanks to my taxi driver (I told him I was in a rush)! He



understood my broken Italian without difficulty; hand gestures can replace words, you know!

Sunday, 8pm. Reunion with Frs. Berg, Bisig, and du Fay. The memories of twenty-one years ago have come flooding back. Granted, we all have a calmer spirit these days, but our general feeling was the same, and our enthusiasm hadn't flagged at all, as the very idea of a Papal audience had us over the moon, and it was going to be difficult for us to come back down to earth!

Monday 6<sup>th</sup> July, 7am. After a night as hot as only Rome can get, I met Fr. Berg again in front of St. Peter's. Going in to the Basilica, we filed into the sacristy, put our vestments on, and went to offer Holy Mass. After a few minutes' wait there was a free altar. I went up to it and politely thanked the altar boy who had come with me— it was clear that he was lost with the Extraordinary Form, and was only too happy to go back to the sacristy and carry on chattering with his friends.

'Introibo ad altare Dei...' I raised my eyes, finding myself at the altar of St. Leo the Great. Above the altar, a painting depicted Pope St. Leo stopping Attila the Hun from entering Rome. In the sky, the portentous fingers of St. Peter and St. Paul order the Hun-chief to retreat! I thought of all the present-day Attilas. And right now, the portentous finger of God was hidden, humble, yet awesome, in the Real Presence. At the altar, I offered my family, friends, parishioners, and the whole Fraternity to God.

11am, at the foot of the Obelisk. We were supposed to be at the Bronze Doors in time for 11:45am, but we had to get through the security doors first. There was a

large crowd of people who wanted to visit St Peter's, and half an hour just wasn't going to be enough for us to get through those dratted detectors! We met just at the stroke of eleven: Frs. Berg, Bisig, du Fay, Recktenwald, Zimmer, Gorgès and I. Fr. Berg had a brainwave — he went up to the police on guard by those unavoidable detectors, and showed one of them the letter granting us audience. They were as polite as could be— the officer in charge indicated that all we had to do was to report to the detectors five minutes before the audience, just by going through the Bernini colonnade, and he would give us priority access!

11:40am. We went through the security detectors as tourists shot envious glances at us. 'Who are these VIPs?' they must have wondered! As we didn't have a bomb with us, everything went very smoothly.

11:45am. The serious business began. We were welcomed at the top of the steps leading to the Bronze Door by the Swiss Guard on duty, and he passed our letter to his officer. A quick phone call later and we were invited to enter. The usual salute, then they showed us the way. We went up the magnificent staircase to the Courtyard of St. Damascus and walked across

it. Another Swiss Guard and another salute. We had got to the lift— we only hoped that it wouldn't break down!

An usher in very grand attire took charge of us; he was wearing a grey morning-coat and a white cravat. At first, he had us wait in the Clementine Hall. We spoke in hushed tones. Fr. Zimmer took a few photos. Then we were moved again, this time into a parlour, where we spoke in even quieter tones. A diplomat, his wife, and their two children smiled at us enthusiastically, and we smiled back. They were even more excited than we were. We knew the feeling! They'd be welcomed in in a few moments.

Our time had come, but (and I hope you'll forgive me) — I hadn't kept an eye on the time at all! In silence we went through a succession of small parlours; thus we arrived at a door, which, of course, had wisely been left closed, but we could still hear the dulcet tones of the Holy Father's voice through it. The door opened, and Fr. Berg was the first to be received. He stayed with the Holy Father for a conversation of nearly 15 minutes. But those 15 minutes seemed like an eternity! A small bell rang, and the door opened. Each of us went in, one after the other. The Vicar of Christ was stood there, welcoming us. Each of us was introduced by Fr. Berg,

and the Holy Father took our hands with a smile, the smile of a father in common. There we testified our recognition of his authority by genuflecting before him and kissing the Fisherman's Ring. His face was that of a man of prayer, communicating his fatherly concern for every one of his priests, in knowing that we are with him, and his faith in our mission and our fidelity.



(Pope Benedict with founders; Fr Coiffet is second from left.)

When we asked him what he expected from the Fraternity of St. Peter, he replied with simple magnificence, 'Only that it remain faithful, as it has always been.'

Official photographs were taken with us all surrounding the Pope. A moving moment when he gave us each a rosary. An informal moment as he spoke freely with Fr. Bisig. We had much to contemplate as we received his blessing. Then that last smile, and final words of encouragement, and we had to leave.

We spoke with a Swiss Guard in the Courtyard of St. Damascus. He came from Fribourg and was very familiar with the Fraternity. Then he raised his halberd in a final salute, at the top of the steps to the Bronze Doors. At the bottom, some Japanese tourists had gone into a photograph-taking frenzy at the sight of these seven silent priests in their cassocks!

On the plane back (Kuwait Airways!) I brought back much more than a happy memory — I brought the joy of being truly Roman, and of sharing that joy with others.

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Founding Member of the Fraternity of St. Peter