

I
Roots

We three children were all born in the vicinity of Altötting, the famous place of pilgrimage dedicated to the Mother of God, but not in the same village. My sister Maria (*born December 7, 1921*) and I (*born January 15, 1924*) came into the world in Pleiskirchen; my brother, Joseph, the Holy Father (*born April 16, 1927*), was born in Marktl am Inn. Because our father was a policeman by profession, he was often transferred, as was customary at the time. In any case, several times our whole family went on pilgrimage to Altötting. The shrine there, that wonderful little church, has a long and distinguished history that goes back to the Carolingian period. Yet we did not travel there as pilgrims on account of that historical character but, rather, because we knew it is a profoundly spiritual place. Our father even belonged to the Men's Marian Congregation, a sodality that has its headquarters in Altötting and was entirely committed to honoring the Mother of God. That was one reason that drew him and us to that place again and again. These pilgrimages to the famous Black Madonna are among our most beautiful childhood memories. The spiritualized atmosphere, the result of constant prayer, charmed my brother and me so that even then we were profoundly under its influence. Therefore, growing up near Altötting played an important role in our lives and also in our esteem for the Mother of God. We could always entrust our cares and worries to our Lady; however small they may have been in our childhood, we always felt protected by her.

No one ever really spoke about the time before our parents' marriage. So I did not know that my grandparents had been married at another Marian shrine, in Absam. But it is nice to know that plainly the blessing of the Mother of God was upon their marriage, too.

My mother's family was originally from Tyrol. Her parents were bakers. The father, a Bavarian Swabian by the name of Isidor Rieger, was born (*on March 22, 1860*) in Welden, which is said to be a very charming place. Her grandparents had owned a mill near Brixen in South Tyrol (*which at that time was still under Austrian rule*) that was then swept away by flooding of the Rienz River. After that, the whole family emigrated to Bavaria. For the rest of her life, my grandmother yearned for her homeland. When she became sick and was gradually approaching death, she always used to say, "If only I had a bit of water from home, I would become well again." She was convinced that the water in Tyrol was quite different from Bavarian water. She also thought that "a little hatful of hay from Tyrol" was more valuable as fodder for the cattle than a whole cartful of Bavarian hay. She was just a great Tyrolean patriot.¹

My mother, Maria Ratzinger, née Peintner, was born on January 8, 1884, in Mühlbach bei Oberaudorf (in the Rosenheim district) in the extreme southeastern part of Bavaria, and the church where she was baptized is also there. This is the same Mühlbach where the famous soccer player Bastian Schweinsteiger grew up, too. She then went to elementary school in Rimsting on Lake Chiemsee, "the Bavarian Sea". Her parents, as I said, were bakers, and so the children had to deliver the bread every morning before school. After all, the customers wanted to have their fresh rolls and breakfast bread brought right to the house. For seven years she attended the school, and then she

¹ Maybe that is why she insisted on being married in Absam/Tyrol, although at that point in time she had long since been living in the Bavarian town of Mühldorf.



Maria Peintner, the mother of Joseph and Georg Ratzinger, as a young woman

took various jobs as a maid. Her first employer was a first violinist in Salzburg. Zinke was his name; he was Czech and always practiced diligently. Thus she came into contact with music. Unfortunately the first violinist was very poorly paid; he always had to play additional concerts so as to be able to survive somehow, and my mother's wages were accordingly meager. Later she worked in Kufstein in a bakery. Then she found a position in Hessen with a General Zech, who lived in Hanau, and finally she went to the Hotel Neuwittelsbach in Munich, where they were looking for a cook to make puddings, which was her specialty. And so she had already seen and experienced a few things when she met my father. During our childhood, her warmth and cordiality time and again compensated for our father's strictness. She was always cheerful and friendly toward everyone and used to sing Marian hymns while washing the dishes. Above all, however, she was also a very practical, splendid wife who was never at a loss, a real Jill-of-all-trades: she was a tailor and could make

soap and knew how to prepare a tasty meal from the simplest ingredients. She was particularly adept, as I mentioned, at making delicious puddings, which are still among the favorite foods of my brother and me. Her Bavarian dumplings, which had a thick crust underneath, were marvelous. They were served with vanilla sauce. We also loved her apple strudel. Good housewives know that in a real apple strudel, the dough is so thin that it is almost transparent. It is rather wide; it is pulled apart at the corners, and then the other ingredients are added, the apple filling, raisins, and all sorts of other good things. An apple strudel like that, with a paper-thin crust, is just wonderful. Then I should mention her pancakes, which she always served with *ribisl*, as she used to call currants; this was an old Tyrolean name that hardly anyone in Bavaria could make sense of. And finally, of course, I must not forget her *kaiserschmarrn*, which was simply excellent.²

Otherwise we lived rather simply. We grew up to be very thrifty, for on the income of an ordinary policeman we could not afford to be extravagant. Father had to manage the money carefully so that there would be enough. Still, our parents thought it was very important for us to make a proper impression. Mother, fortunately, eased the strain on the family budget considerably. First, because we always had a garden in which she grew vegetables. During the summer months we did not need to buy vegetables, because she planted and harvested lettuce, cabbage, and carrots herself. Working in the garden was her passion. Naturally, she also planted a few beautiful flowers, which gave her so much joy.

Then, too, our mother always used to knit diligently. She herself made the caps, sweaters, socks, scarves, gloves, and everything else we wore in the winter. So she just had to buy the yarn, which greatly eased the strain on our father's budget. At that

²A caramelized pancake with bits of fruit and nuts, cut into pieces, and served with fruit sauce and powdered sugar.—TRANS.



The extended Ratzinger family on the eightieth birthday of the paternal grandmother, Katharina Ratzinger, at the Ratzinger farm in Rickering. Sitting on the ground to the left is Georg (7), to the right, Joseph (4); Maria (9) is standing in a light-colored dress; standing, on the far right, are the parents Joseph and Maria Ratzinger. Standing on the left is Uncle Anton, and sitting in front of him is their priest uncle, the Reverend Alois Ratzinger.

time, in rural areas at least, it was not customary to buy knit woolen clothing. At any rate, we always had two pairs of gloves to choose from: mittens, which left only the thumbs free, and then five-fingered gloves. For my father and for us, Mother was simply a great windfall.

I was acquainted with both my grandmothers. My mother's mother, Maria Rieger-Peintner, did not pass away until 1930. Until then she lived in Rimsting. I visited her once with my mother. She was a rather sour woman and an expert scold, so I was told.

The only thing I recall now about my grandmother on my father's side (*Katharina Ratzinger, née Schmid, 1851–1937*) is that she was a very old lady with a black kerchief. Other than that,

I unfortunately have no memories of her. I saw her only once, when she celebrated her eightieth birthday (*in 1931*). On that occasion, there was a big party with all her relatives. It was celebrated a short distance upstream along the Danube, in Altenmarkt, I think. There is even a photo of the event, which the local historian and former senior civil servant Johann Nußbaum from Rimsting published in his book about the roots of our family.³ The original is in the possession of my relatives, the family of Anton Messerer in Rickerling bei Schwanenkirchen, the place where my father was born, too. Their grandfather was one of my father's brothers.

My father's uncle was also originally from Rickerling; this was my great-uncle, Doctor Georg Ratzinger, a priest and a politician who was eventually elected to the German Imperial Parliament. Our father often spoke about him and about his main published work, *Geschichte der kirchlichen Armenpflege* (A history of the Church's work for the poor), which was also his dissertation. He had written it at the suggestion of the renowned Church historian Ignaz von Döllinger. In it he demonstrated how the care for the poor that flourished during the Middle Ages ended with the Reformation. He did write other books, too, though, for example, *Die Volkswirtschaft in ihren sittlichen Grundlagen* (The moral foundations of the political economy), which was an attempt to reconnect economic theory with a Christian ethic, centered on "the social question". Moreover, he deserves credit for having been an enlightened opponent of child labor. Currently a historian from Trier, Doctor Karl-Heinz Gorges, is working on a monograph about him, and then of course I should mention Doctor Tobias Appl from Regensburg, another historian who is an assistant professor of Bavarian history and has published articles about him. He gave a talk at a conference on the

³ Nußbaum, Johann, "Poetisch und herzensgut": *Die Spuren des Papstes und seiner Familie in Rimsting* (Rimsting, 2006).

life and work of my great-uncle that was held here in Regensburg in 2008.

Doctor Georg Ratzinger (1844–1899), as a member of the Bavarian Patriotic Party, was a member of the House of Representatives of the Bavarian Parliament from 1875 to 1877 and a member of the German Imperial Parliament from 1877 to 1878. From 1893 to 1899, he was again elected to the Bavarian Parliament, first as a member of the Bavarian Farmers' Union and, then, from 1894 on, as an independent representative. As such, he then belonged again to the Imperial Parliament from 1898 until his death one year later.

Ratzinger had the reputation of being an outstanding writer with an inclination to polemics. At the height of the Kulturkampf that Imperial Chancellor Bismarck conducted against Catholic Germany, his writings were confiscated and he himself was arrested for interrogation. For a time, he was editor-in-chief of the Fränkisches Volksblatt in Würzburg. He was one of the most important pioneers in German Catholic journalism. As a conservative disciple of Döllinger, he was regarded with suspicion by the State but also by ecclesiastical circles loyal to the State, which made an academic career as a Church historian impossible. For that reason alone, he went into politics. He described himself as “anti-imperial” and as a “clerical-socialist”. He rejected Prussia’s militaristic striving to become a great power. In his opinion, militarism was a burden that fell chiefly on the shoulders of taxpaying workers and farmers and served the monopolistic ambitions of high finance. He recognized and foresaw as early as 1895 that these militaristic tendencies would end in a world war. He was convinced that such a fate could be warded off only by reorganizing the State according to the principles of Catholic social teaching.

Even during his lifetime, Ratzinger’s career was accompanied by various attempts to slander him. Today his undoubtedly considerable accomplishment as a Catholic social reformer is overshadowed by the accusation that he was the author of two anti-Semitic works published under the names “Doctor Robert Waldhausen” and “Doctor Gottfried Wolf”.

Father spoke well of him, but then we never learned anything in particular about him. It was just that we knew and were glad that among our ancestors there was a figure who had played a certain part and had achieved something of significance. In any case, his example had nothing to do with our decision to become priests. We never read his writings in my family, and his opinion about the Jews, which he allegedly did not even publish under his own name, was not something we knew about.

If we are to believe the family tree that hangs in the museum of the papal house in Marktl am Inn, the Ratzingers were an old farming family. Their genealogy can be traced uninterruptedly back to the year 1600, when one Georg Ratzinger, a farmer in Ratzing in the Diocese of Passau, was first mentioned in the church records. In fact, their roots extend much farther back. As the historian Herbert Würster demonstrated at the above-mentioned scholarly conference about Doctor Georg Ratzinger, the family goes back to one Razi, who lived in the late tenth century in Sandbach in the Diocese of Passau. As the entry from the years 947-970 indicates, he was employed by the Church of Passau and perhaps even founded the hamlet of Ratzing, which is located 0.6 mile from Sandbach. From him was probably descended an official by the name of Dietricus de Rezing, who appeared in the records of the monastery in Vornbach around the years 1173-1200. The municipal court of what is today Innstadt in Passau was assigned in 1258 to one Heinrich Razinger; thus he was "a high-ranking and evidently accomplished servant of the Prince-Bishop of Passau". Obviously the family at that time was well-to-do; in any case, one Otto Ratzinger was mentioned in 1318 as a citizen and homeowner in Innstadt (Passau). One of these two Ratzingers, according to Würster, may have been the founder of the second Ratzing in what is today the district of Freinberg in Innviertel (today in Upper Austria), where he evidently acquired land and a country house. In any case, the local estate "Recing", later "Räzinger am untern Freinberg", is mentioned

for the first time in 1304 in a document of the cathedral chapter in Passau. Thus on the Ratzinger estate developed the farming branch of a once bourgeois family that has been documented uninterruptedly from 1600 on. Since 1801, the family has owned the Strasser estate in Rickering, on which the grandfather of Benedict XVI was also born.

Father's father was also originally from Rickering, a hamlet that belongs to the parish in Schwanenkirchen. The oldest child of his parents was a girl by the name of Anna, who was born before their marriage. Then our father, Joseph Ratzinger, was born as their second child. He really never felt at ease there during his youth, because as the oldest son he had to help with the work on the farm at a very early age. That was difficult, hard work. Then he went to elementary school. At that time an assistant pastor by the name of Rosenberger taught there who played an important role in his life and made a deep, formative impression on him. He gave very intensive and valuable instruction in religion, which even then our father is said to have appreciated very much.

In addition he had a teacher, Herr Weber, who accepted children into the church choir at an early age. He led them in performing seven- or eight-part choral Masses, and our father was involved. Later, he liked to tell us over and over that even as a boy he had sung along in the church choir in Schwanenkirchen under the direction of Herr Weber. So early on, he was enthusiastic about church music, which apparently played an important role in the spiritual life of that parish.

During that time, our father developed his love for music. Then one day he bought himself a zither and took a few lessons; everything else he taught himself. In any event, he owned a whole box of sheet music that was always on the kitchen cupboard, right beside the zither. In the evening, then, he often took it down from there and played and sang for us. There was always a special mood when we gathered around him and he

played at first a stirring march and then some song from that period. Today, probably, no one would understand those songs; they were a bit maudlin and sentimental, but at the time they moved us deeply. At any rate, it was always very nice when Father played the zither, and it certainly predisposed me to embark on my own career in music. Otherwise, Father was a strict but also a very fair man. He always told us when something was wrong, but he never scolded us unnecessarily and reprimanded us only when we really deserved it. He certainly was a person to be respected, even though he was always modest and friendly toward everyone. He wore a handlebar mustache, as was the fashion then, and was always impeccably dressed. For special occasions Mother cleaned the helmet, saber, and belt of his policeman's uniform very thoroughly with Sidol (*a cleaning solution*), for everything had to be bright and shiny.

After our father finished elementary school, he went on to attend classes that were taught on holidays. These were for former elementary school students who already had a job, like Father, who long since had had to help at home with the work on the farm. These classes always were held on Sundays, and although other subjects were taught, too, religious instruction was central.

On October 20, 1897, at the age of twenty, he had to report to the barracks in Passau and became a soldier. He was probably a much better soldier than my brother and I ever were. He became a noncommissioned officer and also wore the *Schützenschnur*, the decoration for marksmanship, because he was a very good marksman, and he had also been recommended for this distinction by his superiors. By no means did he consider his time in the military an unpleasant memory—unlike us; I must admit I was not happy about being a soldier; nor was my brother. But my father actually liked to reminisce about his time in the military. He served for two years in the Sixteenth Royal Bavarian Infantry Regiment in Passau and three more years in the reserves; then

he retired as a noncommissioned officer. He often told us stories from that time. For instance, there was one very vain Lieutenant von Hazy. When the commandant called him "Lieutenant Hazy", he did not move. Once again: "Lieutenant Hazy"; but nothing happened. But then when he said, "Lieutenant von Hazy", he would answer with a thunderous "Jawohl, Herr Hauptmann!"

After his time in the military, Father returned home at first. Soon it became clear, though, that, not he, but his young brother Anton would inherit his father's farm. Why that was so, Father never told us. He then had to decide what further career path to take, and he probably inquired about where he had the best chances with his training as a noncommissioned officer. They told him there were two possibilities, namely, with the police force, which at that time was called the rural police, or with the railroad company. I do not know what his reasons were at the time, but in any case he applied to the police force and was accepted.

The Bavarian State Archives in Munich still have on file his service record, which the local historian Johann Nußbaum from Rimsting found a few years ago. It states that he was "25 years old, Catholic, single, 5 feet 5 inches tall". His first assignment was in Niederambach near Schrobenhausen. After several transfers, he was appointed sergeant in Königssee after six and a half years, and eight and a half years after that, in 1917, he was promoted to a deputy constable in Kolbermoor, only two years later to constable in Unterneukirchen, then in 1921 to station chief. In thirty-five years of service, he was transferred fourteen times. "To outward appearances, he seemed lanky and tough. He wore a mustache that went gray early." So he is described by Nußbaum, who was able to speak with contemporary witnesses. "His demeanor was sober and stern. A robust man, modest and taciturn—typical for men from the region between the Danube and the Bavarian Forest."

At that time it was customary for policemen to be transferred often, if only to safeguard against any "special dealings". I certainly



Joseph Ratzinger, Sr., the Pope's father, as a young officer

cannot list all the posts to which he was assigned at one time or another. He was on Lake Königssee once, in Holledau, and during the First World War in Ingolstadt, where the local police unit was reinforced at the time, because there was a lot of industry there and the authorities feared an outbreak of riots among the workers.

The young policemen were poorly paid, and he probably said to himself that with those wages he could not feed a family. So he waited to marry until he was earning enough money. By then he was already forty-three. We never learned that he became acquainted with our mother by way of a personal announcement; he never told us that.

As was customary for policemen at the time, despite the fact that he was forty-three years old, he had to ask his superior first for permission to marry. Nußbaum found in the Bavarian State Archives the following letter also: "On November 9 (1920), I intend to marry the single cook Maria Peintner, born January 8, 1884, in Mühlbach, District of Rosenheim,

and I hereby request the permission necessary to do so.” After only one week he received permission.

Then there was the wedding. I think it took place in Pleiskirchen, where my sister and I then were born also. He lived there in a neighborhood called Klebing beside a little lake or pond, where the frogs were always croaking.

I visited Pleiskirchen for the first time a few years ago, thanks to arrangements made by one of our auxiliary bishops, Bishop Karl Flügel, who died in 2004. It is a pretty place with a very beautiful church and a castle with origins that go back to the eleventh century.

Nevertheless, our mother felt very uneasy in the house situated so remotely on the lake and was often afraid. That is why Father obtained a dog for her, but it proved to be even more timid than Mother, even though it was probably a very fine dog otherwise.

Generally those were troubled times. Inflation was raging then, prices soared immensely, and you paid as much as 200 million reichsmark for a loaf of bread. At that time my father was paid daily, but no sooner did he have his money in his hands than it was no longer worth anything, because the prices had gone up again. When I came into the world in 1924, Father later told me, my mother was very sick. She had almost not survived it. He himself was on an errand at the time, and when he came home I was already there in a basket, he said.

Yet there must have been beautiful moments, too, because our mother always used to say that the best time for her was when the children were still small. One year later, in May 1925, my father was then transferred to Markt. That is where my brother, Joseph, was born.

The transfer document from the “Bavarian Rural Police Administration” dated April 22, 1925, is still preserved in the Bavarian State Archives.

Thereafter the station chief of police took up "his new position in the same service capacity with his previous basic wage as accounted for in the budget" on May 1. On November 1, 1927, Joseph Ratzinger, Sr., was then promoted "in the name of the government of the Free State of Bavaria" to security commissioner at salary level 6 with a yearly income of 2,124 reichsmark. As chief of the police station in Marktl, he was naturally one of the dignitaries of that locale, although he always conducted himself with reserve and modesty, as contemporaries testified. "In the relatively short time that he was here, he won for himself the respect of the inhabitants of Marktl by his sense of justice as well as his cooperation and friendliness in dealing with them", wrote the local newspaper, *Der Burghauser Anzeiger* in 1929 upon his departure. Marktl am Inn, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* said after the election of Joseph Ratzinger to the papacy, was located literally "between heaven and hell", that is to say, halfway between the Marian shrine in Altötting and the Austrian town of Braunau am Inn. There, on April 20, 1889, a man was born whose shadow soon loomed over the childhood of little Joseph and his brother, Georg: Adolf Hitler.

If God speaks to us in history through signs, then perhaps also through this one: Marktl is 18.5 miles from Braunau; it is also 18.5 miles between Wadowice, the birthplace of Blessed John Paul II, and the concentration camp Auschwitz. Wadowice, too, had its nearby Marian shrine, the *Kalwaria Zebrzydowska*, only 12.5 miles away, with its "weeping" icon of the Mother of God. Both popes, therefore, were born in immediate proximity to places that symbolize, like no others, the rise and inhumane cruelty of National Socialism. Yet the two birthplaces are likewise under the protection of the Mother of God, who always vanquishes evil.

II

Markt1

(1925-1929)

My earliest childhood memories come from the time when we lived in Marktl am Inn. The official residence of the policeman, thus of my father, was located there in a spacious house on the marketplace, the “Mauthaus”, built in 1701. At the time of our move, I was a little more than one year old; my sister was already four. The central point of Marktl was and still is its church. Today only a part of it is preserved, since the church building from that time was partially incorporated into a new building that went up later.

The place of worship goes back to an endowment from the pious Berengar III Graf von Leonberg, who died in 1296. It was originally built entirely in the Gothic style and dedicated to Saint Oswald. After it was struck by lightning, the church and with it a large part of the village were destroyed by fire in 1701, but one year later reconstruction began. As the years went by, the newly constructed church became too small and was therefore torn down in 1853 and rebuilt. In 1964, there was a fourth building project, into which parts of the church from the nineteenth century were integrated, among them the neo-Gothic altar from 1857.

I can remember that it had an oratory, practically a rood loft on the side. From there Mother often pointed to the choir loft, where Father sang with the church choir. The pastor at that time was a Father Köppl; his assistant or vicar was one Josef Stangl, who is said to have been a rather strict man. Father Köppl,



Marktl am Inn around 1930

on the other hand, was charming and kind. He had a housekeeper named Olga, who owned a dog, to which I often brought bones that were left over from our meals. But the one person in all Marktl who impressed me the most was the town clerk, Andreas Eichner, who also signed my brother's birth certificate. In addition, he was the church musician; he played the organ, conducted the church choir, and on the side conducted a brass band as well. He was a short man, "Andresl", as we called him, but he became, so to speak, my first great model. He himself played the largest instrument, the tuba, and everyone used to say, "There is little Andresl with the big music!" We were well acquainted with him because our father sang with him in the choir. Of course at that time we children were still too young to go to church regularly, but often our parents did take us along.

With us in the house lived one of the first female dentists there ever was in Bavaria. Her name was Amelie Karl; she was single and had a traveling practice as a dentist. Probably the "Fräulein", as she was called, was the only one in the village to

own such a newfangled motorcycle. When she drove off in the morning, it made a terrible racket that caused quite a sensation throughout the village.

In Marktl, our sister, Maria, went to school for the first time. There was an elementary school there that was located quite near our house. I always waited then for my sister, since now in the morning I was alone at home with Mother, who of course was busy with household chores or shopping. When Maria came home, we often quarreled but then made up again quickly, as children do. She was a very orderly person; with her everything always had its precise place, whereas I was a little genius of disorder. With me it seemed that chaos prevailed, but I always knew precisely where I had to reach when I needed something. My sister often straightened up my area and packed everything away nicely and neatly, and then I could not find anything anymore. So of course there was an argument. Yet that is often the case; girls are inclined to be clean and tidy, while boys are rather sloppy, and I was sloppy, I will be the first to admit it. But usually we got along well. A classmate of hers, whose name was Marei, died in the first or second grade, which at the time affected us children deeply. The story was that Marei had become seriously ill because she had always eaten snow. We were warned, therefore, not to eat any snow. I do not know whether there was any truth to it or whether it was just an old wives' tale.

One thing I still remember well is the attic of our house in Marktl. A lot of books were stored there—they must have belonged to a former resident—and they made me curious. So we always wanted to go up to the attic and at least look at the books, since we could not yet read. We discovered a drum up there, too, but I think our parents forbade us to play with it. In any case, I later got a drum for Christmas that particularly fascinated me. Whenever the sun shone on it, it magically produced different patterns on the drumhead. So there must have been something very special inside, I thought, and finally I poked

through the drumhead. With that, the fine drum was broken, of course, and my first, still somewhat hesitant attempt to learn how to play a musical instrument had failed for the moment.

Then came the day about which so much has been written, that April 16, 1927, when my brother Joseph was born. It was Holy Saturday, and it is said to have been cold with a lot of snow—terrible weather, then. Yet all I remember is that I woke up and noticed that I was alone. Actually I was not used to sleeping alone; at that time my parents and my sister still slept beside me. But that night, or else in the early morning hours, I was suddenly lying alone in bed. No one had awakened me, as they usually did, and instead I heard the noise of hectic activity. Doors slammed, rapid footsteps resounded in the hall, people were talking loudly. When I heard my father's voice, I said, "Father, I want to get up!" But Father said, "No, you must wait a while; today we have a little baby boy!" At the time it was all a bit puzzling for me.

The future Pope Benedict XVI was born at 4:15 A.M., and his baptism followed that same morning at 8:30. Because the godmother, Anna Ratzinger, could not be notified quickly enough, a nun by the name of Adema Rohrhirsch filled in for her.

In those days, the liturgy of the Easter Vigil was celebrated on the morning of Holy Saturday. Because the blessing of the baptismal water and the rite of baptism are an integral part of that liturgy, the parents did not hesitate long: "Well, the boy is already here now, so now he'll be baptized." In some way that was a special coincidence, a good omen. Only the other two children, Georg and Maria, had to remain back at the house, because it was snowing so heavily their parents feared that they might catch cold. The mother stayed home, too; she was still too exhausted by the birth to venture out into the snow. So the newborn, the first to be baptized with the holy water that had just been blessed, was christened "Joseph Aloisius". "On the threshold of Easter, but not yet through the door" (SE 42) became from then on the metaphor for

his whole life, which from the very beginning was thus immersed in the Paschal mystery.

The neo-Gothic baptismal font, made of bright Danube limestone with six angels' heads, over which little Joseph Alois was held on that occasion has fortunately been preserved. It had been banished at first to the yard of the rectory when the church was rebuilt in 1965, and then the inhabitants of Marktl put it in their local museum in 1992. Research at that time found that it was the work of a sculptor in Munich, Anselm Sickinger (1807–1873), who had taken part in the construction of the Victory Gate in Munich. After the election of Joseph Ratzinger as pope, it “was allowed” to return to the church. Since then it stands before the neo-Gothic altar of Saint Oswald, a remnant from the former house of worship. On Easter Sunday 2006, which coincidentally fell on the Pope's birthday and the anniversary of his baptism, it was used again for the first time for the baptism of a child.

After a few days, I, too, was finally allowed to see my little brother Joseph. He was very slight and delicate. Father had hired a nun to help Mother during those days, because her health was still considerably impaired after the birth. This sister then tended, bathed, and dressed my brother. What worried us at the time was that when he was supposed to be fed, he could not keep his food down. She tried all sorts of things, but he did not like any of it, until the idea occurred to her to give him oatmeal. And lo and behold, he was able to keep the oatmeal down and even liked to eat it. It practically saved his life, for by then the sister was at a loss. Ever since, he has enjoyed oatmeal, as our father did, incidentally. My sister and I did not like it especially.

On other occasions, too, unfortunately, he was often sick. Once he even came down with a serious case of diphtheria, and then Father immediately called the doctor. It was a rather painful treatment; he screamed. On the day he came down with diphtheria, we were in our yard, where beautiful strawberries grew. Our landlord, the man who rented out the policeman's residence,

had the fine name of Narrnhammer and was an awfully nice man. When he saw that we children were fascinated by the strawberries, he let us pick a few. My brother chose an especially pretty one for himself, but he was not able to swallow it, because his nose and throat were all swollen and inflamed by the disease. He may have been one or two years old, I no longer recall exactly.

At that time we had a good relationship with the owners of the house. Frau Narrnhammer was a very cheerful person. I can still remember very well how she put her hands on her hips and laughed so loud that she roared. She had two daughters still at home. Often, when Mother was short on time, one of the two filled in and looked after us children.

Across from our house and to the left was a little convent of the Sisters of Mellersdorf. A Sister Pia lived there, whom I particularly respected. She later became the Mother Superior for awhile. A short distance outside the town, the sisters ran another house, Saint Anthony's House. Until a few years ago it was still owned by the order and served as a boarding school for homeless children.

Once the nuns reported to our father that someone was stealing from their garden regularly. They had a large garden in which they grew the fruit and vegetables they needed for the children's meals and their own. Father then tracked down the thief. In return, he received a big package from the convent, and Mother was very touched by all that was in it: sugar, flour, everything needed to feed a household. That was the convent's gift to thank him for catching the thief.

At that time in Marktl, there was Lechner's Kaufhaus, a grocery store that was practically across the street from our house. Today it is occupied by a pharmacy. During Advent, we—with my sister on the right, me on the left, and little Joseph, who could not yet walk by himself, in the middle—always used to go over to look at the display in the festively decorated shop window. There, surrounded by evergreen branches, gold foil, and

tinsel, were toys that children might like to have. What fascinated Joseph most was a bear that had a very friendly expression. We went then every day, despite wind and weather, to visit the little bear, because we all liked it, but Joseph most of all had taken it to his heart. He would have liked so much to hold it in his arms. Once the owner of the shop, a very nice lady, asked us in and revealed to us the little bear's name: Teddy! Then one day, shortly before Christmas, we tried to visit the teddy bear again, but he was no longer there. My brother wept bitterly: "The little teddy bear is gone!" We tried to console him, but he was much too sad, and really we were, too. Then we went back home, quite disappointed.

Then came Christmas and the exchange of gifts. When Joseph came into the festively decorated room where the Christmas tree stood, he was so happy he laughed out loud. For there, where the presents for us children were set out, stood the teddy bear at his place. The Christ Child had brought it for him. That gave the youngster the greatest joy of his life.

Generally speaking, our family made a big thing of Christmas. The preparations already began with the First Sunday of Advent. At that time, the Rorate Masses were celebrated at six in the morning, and the priests wore white vestments. Normally violet is the color of the vestments in Advent, but these were special votive Masses that were supposed to recall the appearance of the Archangel Gabriel to the Mother of God and her words, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to thy word" (Lk 1:38). That was the main theme of these "liturgies of the angels", as they were also called, in which the appropriate passage from the Gospel of Luke was read. After we started school, we used to attend these Masses in the early morning, before classes began. Outside it was still night, everything was dark, and the people often shivered in the cold. Yet the warm glow of the sanctuary compensated for the early rising and the walk through snow and ice. The dark church was



Bernard Lechner's store in Marktl, where Joseph saw his first teddy bear

illuminated by candles and tapers, which were often brought by the faithful and provided not only light but also a little warmth. Afterward we went home first, ate breakfast, and only then set out for school. These Rorate Masses were wonderful signposts leading us to Christmas.

On the morning of December 24, we began first by putting together the family manger scene. Every year we were eager to make it even more beautiful. In 1929 we moved to Tittmoning, which was located on the Salzach, and along the river there were tuff stones that we used to collect. These are volcanic stones of several very different types: some had holes in them, others were grooved, while still others had bold, sharp corners, and with these one could decorate the crèche marvelously. We then brought a whole basketful of tuff stones and built wonderful hilly landscapes with them. (My brother still has the little family manger scene with the tuff stones from

Tittmoning; it is set up at Christmastime in the dining room of his apartment in the Apostolic Palace.) Then we obtained evergreen branches, which formed the background and contrasted nicely with the grayish stones, and scratched moss from the trees, which served as the pasture for the shepherds' flock. Thus our crèche took on a somewhat different appearance each year and was also expanded regularly. In some years, Mother bought additional figures, for instance, a few sheep or another shepherd and once even a sheepdog.

In the afternoon, our mother told us we should go for a walk. Usually there was deep snow, and then we went sledding, while Mother decorated the Christmas tree. Late in the afternoon we returned, and then we prayed the Rosary first. Praying the Rosary was a usual thing in our family, often daily, but at least every Saturday. We knelt down on the kitchen floor, each one with a chair in front of him, leaning his arms on the chair, and one of us, most often Father, led the prayers.

After the Rosary, we heard the sound of a bell ringing in the living room across the hall. There the Christmas tree stood, a little spruce tree, with the presents on the table. The sight of this, in the glow of candlelight, always made a deep impression on us. We used real candles that emitted a wonderful fragrance. The tree was ornamented with balls, angel's hair, and tinsel, and also with stars, hearts, and comets that our mother had cut out of bright yellow quince jam. Then Father read the Gospel to us, the Christmas story according to Luke, and we sang Christmas songs, "Silent Night", "Oh du fröhliche", and of course "O Come, Little Children". Once, in 1936, when I was already in high school, I myself wrote a little composition for Christmas. We three then performed it, my sister at the organ, my brother at the piano, and I with my violin. My mother was moved to tears, and even Father, although somewhat more level-headed, was impressed. From then on for a few years I regularly composed something at Christmas.

Because we were so impatient, the exchange of gifts always took place in our house a little earlier than in other families. There was always something wonderful about it, an almost fairy-tale quality to it. Of course we did not receive any magnificent gifts, but mainly things we needed, for instance, articles of clothing, socks our mother had knitted for us herself, caps, or whatever we happened to lack at the time. Moreover, each one also got a plate full of cookies and prunes, dried pears and fruitcake. These were wonderful things, and even today we remember them with great joy.

Of course we could all wish for something. I still recall what I received many years for Christmas. In 1933, when we were already living in Aschau, the Christ Child brought me a Fimoli-brand projector with which you could project whole series of pictures on the wall. In addition, I received three rolls of pictures, one about Altötting, one about the history of the ways in which the Cross has been depicted, and a third one about Rome. I was very happy with it. When the pastor heard about it, he asked me to illustrate with these photographs a lecture on Rome that he gave for the parishioners. In the Holy Year 1933–1934, he had ventured to make a pilgrimage to the Eternal City but of course had not taken photographs. That was not customary at the time, and so I as a ten-year-old showed pictures of the sights and the most significant churches, which otherwise he could only have described; this naturally caused something of a sensation.

In 1935, when I was in my first year at boarding school, I received a book of chant, the *Liber Usualis*, which was used at the seminary, and nevertheless, cost five reichsmark. It was a thick book with over a thousand pages, in which Latin text and the chant notation were printed. Joseph was quite impressed, because there was not a single German word in that thick book, but after all I was in secondary school by then and was already taking Latin classes. In my second year, I received the score to Rheinberger's Mass in F-minor, which we sang in the seminary

choir, and in my third year, the piano arrangement of the beautiful composition “Das Lied von der Glocke”, a setting by Andreas Romberg (1767–1821) of Friedrich Schiller’s famous poem.

When we were younger, my brother, Joseph, usually received stuffed animals, and I got building blocks. So our wishes and talents were different. My brother received a second teddy bear, another time a horse, a duck, and a dog. He was very fond of animals, and therefore our parents always gave him stuffed animals. But once the Christ Child brought him a model train set, too.

Finally punch was served to us children, which of course was not very strong, and cookies, too. Afterward we had to go to bed rather early. When we were a little older, we woke up then at 11:00 in the evening so that we could attend Midnight Mass in the church. In the morning on the first day of Christmas, there was always a very special, festive breakfast with a Christmas stollen and pure coffee, which our father especially liked and to which he always looked forward. In the afternoon at 2:00, we attended Vespers, also; the church choir sang then, and it was always very solemn.

In our family, though, it was not only Christmas that was marked by the deep faith of our parents and the religious customs of our homeland. From our parents we learned what it means to have a firm grasp of faith in God. Every day we prayed together, and in fact before and after each meal (we ate our breakfast, dinner, and supper together). The main prayer time was after the midday dinner, when the particular concerns of the family were expressed. Part of it was the prayer to Saint Dismas, the “good thief”, a former criminal who was crucified together with Jesus on Mount Calvary, repented on the cross, and begged the Lord for mercy. We prayed to him, the patron of repentant thieves, to protect Father from professional troubles.

Being a policeman, after all, was a rather dangerous profession, and we were often very anxious about Father. Especially

when he worked the night shift and had to walk the beat. When a misdemeanor or a crime had occurred in the area he patrolled, it was his duty to investigate it. Father often worked at night, and then it could happen that he was held up, for whatever reasons, and came home later. Then, naturally, we children and Mother were anxious and prayed that nothing had happened to him. So, of course, our prayer life was always marked by concern about Father. When we were children, our parents also put us to bed and prayed our evening prayers with us. They used a very special form of blessing and repeated it three times. Unfortunately I do not remember the wording today. This was followed by another somewhat expansive blessing. Once I asked my father what it meant, but all he said to me was, "I do not know exactly, either. My father and mother used to pray this prayer at my bedside."

I must admit we seldom went to Mass together, simply because our father had to work on Sunday or else sang in the church choir. When we were somewhat older, I and then later my brother served at the altar usually on Sundays and during the week, while Mother and our sister went to another Mass. Often on Sundays we attended Mass twice, once as servers and another time with our family, for instance, the early Mass at 6:00 and the main parish Mass at 8:00 or 8:30. Then, in the afternoon at 2:00, there were devotions, and on feast days a Vespers service.

This piety, which was lived and put into practice, defined our whole life, even though today I celebrate only one Mass and refrain from going to a second one. Nevertheless, it was imparted to us as children in the cradle, so to speak, and we remained faithful to it throughout our lives.

I am convinced that the lack of this traditional piety in many families is also a reason why there are too few priestly vocations today. Many people in our time practice a form of atheism rather than the Christian faith. In some respects, they may maintain a sort of vestigial religiosity; perhaps they still go to Mass on the

major feast days, but this rudimentary faith long ago ceased to permeate their lives, and it has no bearing on their everyday routine. It starts with sitting down at table and beginning a meal without even thinking about prayer, and it ends with no longer coming to church regularly on Sundays. Thus, an almost pagan way of life has taken root. If there are no religious practices even in family life, then this has an effect on all the rest of human life. I often speak with brother priests, and in almost all cases it seems that they prayed regularly as a family and went to Mass together. This then shaped their whole lives and directed them toward God. Thus, their vocation fell on fertile soil.

In America there is a saying, "The family that prays together, stays together." In our time, when divorces are the order of the day, there are more and more broken marriages and single parents. Could this be because fewer and fewer families are willing to entrust their problems to God? Are families ruined also by a lack of faith and prayer? Do marriages fail because they leave no room for God?

I certainly think so. If you leave everything at the human level, then the decisive dimension where problems can be resolved is missing.

How did the Ratzinger family deal with marital and family quarrels?

We did not experience that, since each one settled that himself and with God in personal prayer. We did not talk about such things. There are problems in every family, and there were quite definitely in ours, too, but such problems became a part of our prayer. The personal concerns of each one of us were incorporated into that, and then we also surely found the solution there.

The story goes that the late Archbishop of Fulda, Johannes Dyba (1929–2000), came from a very temperamental family in which the members sometimes dealt with each other forcefully.

Yet after they went to confession, a very special peace returned to that family, and a special, conciliatory mood suddenly prevailed. Today, unfortunately, confession is much too often neglected, although it is, after all, the most generous offer of grace that God can possibly make us. We used to go to confession every month. When I was at the seminary in Traunstein, a Jesuit recommended that we should even confess once a week. I must honestly admit that we never did that consistently, but monthly confession is certainly right and necessary for everyone.

The course of the whole year was defined for us by the church holidays. In this regard, I should mention Easter in first place, naturally, even before Christmas. Throughout Lent there were "Mount of Olives" devotions, which in the city took place on Thursday, the day when Christ had prayed so desperately in the Garden of Gethsemane, but in the countryside were held on Sundays for practical reasons. They consisted of a rather long Lenten sermon and the devotion itself, which recalled the three falls of Christ: in Gethsemane, Jesus eventually fell to the ground three times, and so the Mount of Olives devotion was made up of three sections. First, the church choir sang. Usually a man sang a solo, and then there was a hymn and, finally, the prayer recited by the pastor, followed by a period of silence. In the midst of that silence, the large church bell then rang, which lent an especially impressive tone to the whole thing. In Dorfen, where I served for four years as an assistant pastor (*from 1953 to 1957*), there was a Baroque Mount of Olives. Christ was depicted as praying on it. During the devotion, the sacristan then used a crank to lower from the ceiling an angel that was hanging on a rope, with a chalice in his hand, so as to strengthen Jesus for his future suffering and death. Back then, in the Baroque period, as we know, they liked to stage things graphically like that. But sometimes it happened that the crank did not work, and the angel literally plummeted from heaven. But in spite of that, these

Mount of Olives devotions were always a beautiful and moving way to celebrate Lent.

The Easter Vigil ceremony, as I already mentioned, took place on the morning of Holy Saturday, together with the blessing of the baptismal water and the lighting of the Paschal candle. The celebration of the Resurrection followed that afternoon, another Baroque form of piety. At that time, in many churches, including the ones in Tittmoning and Aschau, there was a “Holy Sepulcher”, in other words, an altar that was set up as Christ’s tomb. On it the Most Blessed Sacrament was exposed, over which a white, transparent veil was placed. Beneath the altar, there was a statue of Christ lying in the tomb, adorned with flowers. Colorful, spherical glass containers filled with red, yellow, and green liquid served as special decorations. Thus the Holy Sepulcher offered a marvelous spectacle.

For the celebration of the Resurrection, the church was darkened; all the church windows were draped with black cloth. Then the pastor, in festive vestments and a cope, sang “Christ is risen” three times, to which the choir responded, the third time, “Alleluia!” Actually the priests are supposed to sing each time in a higher key, but most pastors could not distinguish the keys, since they were not that musical, either. Someone stood at each window to let the drapes fall as soon as the pastor intoned the third “Christ is risen.” In Aschau, my brother and I did that, too, for a time. Then the spring sunshine poured into the church and created a Paschal mood. Finally, another procession took place, during which the church choir sang an Easter motet, for instance, in Traunstein, the “Attolite Portas” by Caspar Ett (1788–1847), a composer from Munich who worked at Saint Michael’s. This procession with the Most Blessed Sacrament under the “heaven”, as we called the baldachin, with lots of incense, was always a very festive occasion, which contributed to bringing the good news of the Resurrection deep into the hearts of the believers.

Besides that, there were other popular customs at Easter. There was the blessing of the foods that all the families brought with them, smoked meat or bacon, for example, salt and a few eggs; of course, decorating Easter eggs was also part of Easter. Mother and the ladies usually colored the Easter eggs with onion skin, which made them brown; that was the least expensive way of doing it. But there were also dyes at the grocery store that you could buy, so as to have very colorful Easter eggs. These were brought to be blessed, and of course the *Osterfladen*, a sort of braided yeast bread with a special glaze. Then we ate it after the ceremony. In addition, Mother always baked us a "Paschal Lamb" that was served to us for breakfast.

I have fond memories also of the May devotions that took place usually every day during the month of Mary. We always liked to go to them because the church was so festively decorated, with many flowers that enhanced the sanctuary not only visually but also with their beautiful fragrances. Then the church choir or a group of children sang.

In general, the Mother of God was always with us in our house. In our kitchen, for instance, a picture of Christ hung to the left of the crucifix and, on the other side, a picture of Mary. The Rosary, too, as I already mentioned, was prayed almost every day in our home. Only in the month of the Holy Rosary, October, did we go to pray the Rosary in church.

In those days, a special place in the church calendar was held by the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which was celebrated on February 2. Today, it is more a feast of our Lord, since it recalls the first visit of Jesus to his Father's house, his Presentation in the Temple. But back then, it was mainly a Marian feast. On that day, the family always prayed the Rosary with a special emphasis. Each one had a long, thin candle that he placed on the chair in front of him; we would light them and let them burn down during the recitation of the Rosary. In those days, people thought that the family member whose candle was

extinguished first would also die first, but that of course was only a superstition.

Then there were the tapers; I still have a few today. The women often had a taper beside them in church, which they allowed to burn down during Mass. There were plain tapers but also those that were richly decorated. They played a very special role on the farms, where at that time there were still farmhands and maidservants. The maidservants had to take care of the farmhands: they made their beds and darned their socks, and so on, and as a token of thanks a farmhand used to give to the maid who had served him a taper on the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin.

February 2 was also the so-called *schlankeltag* (from the Bavarian dialect word *schlankeln* = to move house), on which the hired help changed their place of residence. Whenever someone wanted to go somewhere else, the contract of employment always ended on the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. That was the day when the domestic servants left their former employer and started a new job. So it was customary, here in Bavaria at least, for the farmer to ask the farmhands and maidservants ahead of time whether they wanted to stay on, and, if they were willing to do so, they received five marks on that day. In any case, it was an important day on the farmer's calendar and also a holiday on which there was no work. It always ended with a solemn Rosary in the evening with the wax candles.

Of course, we always celebrated our name days in a special way: Maria (September 12), Joseph (March 19), and Georg (April 23). On those occasions, there was always a particular tablecloth belonging to Mother, which I still have today. Every year on my name day, Frau Agnes Heindl, my housekeeper, brings it out again, the name-day tablecloth from back home. Early in the morning, a bit of pure coffee and a pie baked by Mother were served. Father also bought a bottle of wine to celebrate the day. Particularly in Aschau, when we were already somewhat older,

there were always two sorts of wine, either "Malaga" or "Samos". Then we children, too, got a tiny little glass of "Malaga" or "Samos" wine. Naturally on those days there was a festive meal, and we got presents, too. Birthdays, on the other hand, were not especially celebrated in our house; we only expressed congratulations.

But now I have got far ahead of myself. Before we came to Aschau in 1932, we moved first in 1929 from Marktl to Tittmoning, a small town that at the time particularly fascinated us. We perceived Tittmoning, at any rate, as being very urban as opposed to Marktl, which had a more rural character. It is a pretty little provincial town, dominated by a large town square in the southern style, around which small shops were crowded. It was to be our home for the next three years.