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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: POPE BENEDICT XVI SUCCEEDS JOHN PAUL II

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REASON: 1.4 (d)

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Ratzinger Elected Pope Benedict XVI  
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[1](#). (SBU) The Roman Catholic College of Cardinals elected German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger Supreme Pontiff April 19. Ratzinger, 78, has taken the name Pope Benedict XVI. Despite media speculation that Ratzinger had the support of many cardinals, his election was a surprise to many, given indications that other more moderate voices might prevent a two-thirds majority. Just yesterday, Poloff spoke to a top aide to Ratzinger, American Monsignor Charles Brown, who asked half jokingly for prayers for Ratzinger's candidacy. When we saw Brown just after

Benedict's appearance as the new pope, the American was shellshocked: "I'm speechless," he said.

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Powerful Cardinal

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¶2. (SBU) Ratzinger was Dean of the College of Cardinals and had long been considered one of the two or three most powerful men in the Vatican. As head of the Holy See's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican's watchdog for theological orthodoxy, Ratzinger developed a reputation for unapologetic conservatism and a firm hand with wayward theologians. The media often portrayed him as an aloof, autocratic despot. However, in meetings with Ratzinger, Post has found him to be surprisingly humble, spiritual, and approachable.

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Will Stay the Course

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¶3. (C) Post will provide a more detailed analysis of the likely course of Benedict XVI's papacy septel, but the broad strokes seem clear. Benedict XVI will stay the course of John Paul II theologically; there will be no liberalization of Catholic policy on abortion, contraception, priestly celibacy, female priests, and other hotly debated issues. A sermon he delivered Monday before the opening of the conclave indicated as much, as Ratzinger made it clear a new pope should not back down in the face of secularism and other challenges to orthodoxy.

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Europe a Focus

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¶4. (C) Pope Benedict will likely place great emphasis on the Church in Europe. Ratzinger believes Europe is the spiritual

and historic home of the Church, and he is not ready to cede his home continent to the forces of secularism or Islam. In fact, Ratzinger made headlines in August 2004 when he expressed reservations about Turkey's prospective EU membership (04 Vatican 3196). He also led the ultimately unsuccessful drive for a mention of Europe's Christian roots in the new EU constitution, which became a primary focus of John Paul II's last year as pontiff. Many in the Holy See questioned the logic of this focus, given that the constitution already provided the legal protections the church needed, but it reflects the new Pope's certain attention to the spiritual future of Europe.

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Transitional Figure?

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¶5. (SBU) In choosing the name Benedict XVI, Ratzinger may have been acknowledging that at 78, and following an historic papacy, he will be a transitional figure. Benedict XV's short-lived papacy lasted only from 1914-1922. The original St. Benedict, the founder of European monastic tradition, is the patron saint of Europe -- yet another hint of Benedict XVI's intentions.

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Biographical Information

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¶6. (U) Joseph Ratzinger was born on 16 April 1927 in Marktl am Inn, Germany. He was ordained a priest on 29 June 1951. His

father, a police officer, came from a traditional family of farmers from Lower Bavaria. He spent his adolescent years in Traunstein, and was called into the auxiliary anti-aircraft service in the last months of World War II. From 1946 to 1951, the year in which he was ordained a priest and began to teach, he studied philosophy and theology at the University of Munich and at the higher school in Freising. In 1953 he obtained a

doctorate in theology. Four years later, he qualified as a university teacher. He then taught dogma and fundamental theology at the higher school of philosophy and theology of Freising, then in Bonn from 1959 to 1969, Muenster from 1963 to 1966, Tuebingen from 1966 to 1969. From 1969, he was a professor of dogmatic theology and of the history of dogma at the University of Regensburg and Vice President of the same university.

¶7. (U) Already in 1962 he was well known when, at the age of 35, he became a consultor at Vatican Council II, of the Archbishop of Cologne, Cardinal Joseph Frings. In March 1977, Paul VI elected him Archbishop of Munich and Freising and on 28 May 1977 he was consecrated, the first diocesan priest after 80 years to take over the pastoral ministry of this large Bavarian diocese. Ratzinger was created and proclaimed Cardinal by Paul VI in the consistory of 27 June 1977. On 25 November 1981 he was nominated by John Paul II Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; President of the Biblical Commission and of the Pontifical International Theological Commission.

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Comment

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¶8. (C) The election of John Paul II's theologian to succeed him suggests that the College of Cardinals wanted the closest possible theological continuity they could find in a new Pope. At the same time, it is unlikely that the 78-year-old "humble worker in the Lord's vineyard," as he described himself will cut as prominent figure on the world stage as the young and robust John Paul II did when he was first elected. While he will certainly carry on the Holy See's global mission left by his predecessor, his focus is likely to be more on strengthening the church from within than promoting the Church's role externally. Despite his euro-centric focus, he will also need to address the concerns of those Catholics in the developing world whose

priority remains a socially and politically active church working against poverty, disease and oppression. In this regard, and more broadly on international issues, he will face a steep learning curve. We should reach out to him early on to help shape his approach as he begins to grapple with the world beyond the Vatican's walls.

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