

Annotation

By Matthew Battles

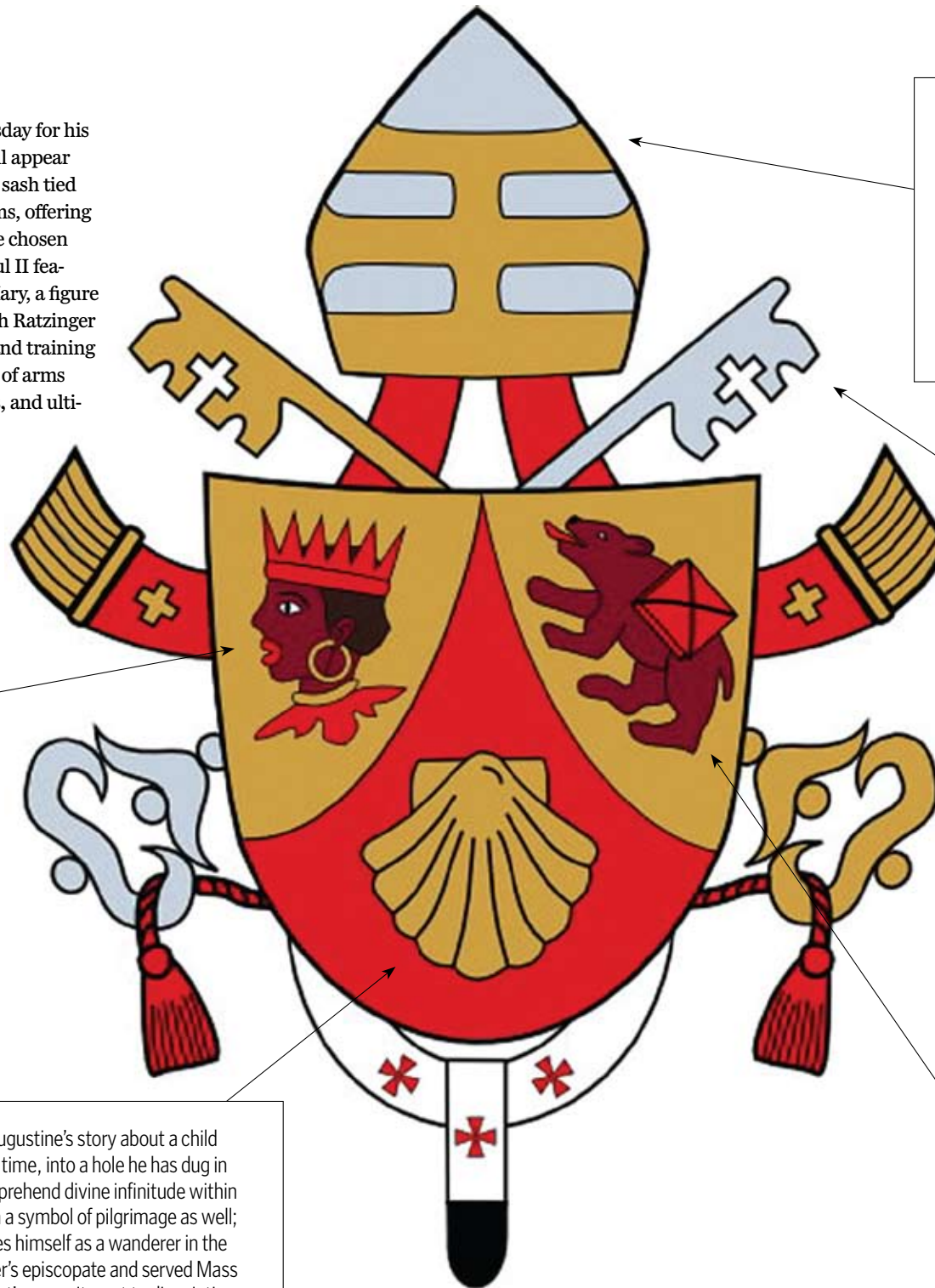
Papal signifiers

How to read the coat of arms of Pope Benedict XVI

When Pope Benedict XVI lands in Washington on Tuesday for his first pontifical visit to the United States, this symbol will appear on everything from the programs for his services to the sash tied around his waist. Each pope creates his own coat of arms, offering clues to the direction he will take the church. Most have chosen simple, straightforward imagery; the shield of John Paul II featured a cross and the letter M to represent the Virgin Mary, a figure central to his papacy. This pope, who as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was the Vatican's chief theologian, is by temperament and training an intellectual, and the ambiguous imagery on his coat of arms suggests a papal mission more scholarly, more rigorous, and ultimately more complex than that of his predecessor.

The Moor's head is one of the most mysterious symbols in heraldry. For centuries it has been an emblem of the German diocese of Munich and Freising, the spiritual home of Joseph Ratzinger. (Legend has it that Saint Corbinian, the seventh-century figure who was Freising's first bishop, may have been a Moor.) Benedict has also called the head his reminder of the global diversity of the Catholic faith. But it has also been controversial: in some heraldic contexts, the Moor's head is severed and raised in crusader triumph, representing forcible dominion over unbelievers. And whatever its intention, a caricature of a black man is a disturbing symbol in today's world. "The truth is, no one really knows what it means," says the Rev. James Weiss, who teaches church history at Boston College. "And the fact that Benedict chose to use this symbol despite its mystery and controversy tells you something about the pope" — in particular, that he views tradition as something we must come to terms with, not something to be ignored or abandoned out of discomfort.

Benedict explains **the scallop shell** as an allusion to St. Augustine's story about a child on the beach trying to scoop the sea, one shell's worth at a time, into a hole he has dug in the sand. To Augustine, this was an image of trying to comprehend divine infinitude within the finite space of the human mind. The shell has long been a symbol of pilgrimage as well; as with the bear, this would seem to signify a Pope who sees himself as a wanderer in the material world. Weiss, who lived in Bavaria during Ratzinger's episcopate and served Mass for him, agrees that these images bespeak not only Benedict's commitment to disquieting traditions, but also his sense of discomfort with rising secularism. This pope comes wandering to America at a charged time, amid a crisis in the relationship of Islam and the West, and to face an American church still wounded by the clergy abuse crisis. Weiss expects Benedict to "leave the impression of optimism, but [also] of vigilant warning, admonition, and a call to get into line. He hasn't failed to do that elsewhere, why should he do so here?"



Though seen as deeply conservative in his approach to Catholicism, Pope Benedict overturns a number of traditions in his coat of arms. One of them is the centuries-old practice of displaying the papal tiara, which here is replaced by the more modest **bishop's mitre**. The mitre is accompanied by another novelty: a pallium, the white sash bedecked with crosses hanging beneath the shield. Together they signal a less glamorous papacy than that of his predecessor, characterized by reliance on doctrine rather than the worldly charisma of John Paul II.

The crossed keys — one of silver, one of gold — representing power in temporal and spiritual realms, have appeared in one form or another in papal coats of arms for centuries. During his visit, observers expect Benedict to call on Catholic universities to reassert their religious character, and to deliver a stern call to obedience for American bishops. Throughout the papal visit there will be reminders of who holds the keys to the faith.

The bear, too, is a symbol of Saint Corbinian, who according to legend was threatened by a bear that he made obey and repent by carrying his books. In "Milestones: Memoirs," the 1977 autobiography he wrote while still Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Benedict likened himself to Corbinian's bear in Rome — a creature out of place in the holy city, bearing the burden of his faith at his God's command. He evokes St. Augustine's commentary on Psalm 73, Line 22: "So foolish was I, and ignorant; I was as a beast before thee." Augustine was inspired by this verse to see himself as a beast of burden doing the will of the Lord.