

## The New Pope: Southtown Article #13

For the past week soldiers have repeatedly asked me who the next pope will be as if I have some special connections with the electing Cardinals. A Protestant chaplain told me, "I think it's going to be Cardinal Ratzinger. The Church needs a good, strong man like him." I assured him it wouldn't be Ratzinger on account of his age. Maybe the soldiers should have asked the Protestant chaplain instead of me.

When the white smoke rose above the Sistine Chapel, our chow hall fell silent. "I think they elected a new pope," someone shouted.

"It's not white, it's black smoke, they'll have to go back to the drawing board," another soldier replied. When the TV's in the dining hall revealed the ringing of the bells we knew for certain.

Many people had heard of Cardinal Ratzinger even if they were unsure exactly what he did at the Vatican. But the interesting reaction among soldiers came about thirty minutes later when the newscasters brought to light his involvement in World War II. The fact he was a prisoner of war struck many of us as ironic, a man of peace in the middle of a war. Even though he was an unwilling soldier, he was a soldier nonetheless. Would he be as receptive to soldiers as John Paul II was? Would he harbor ill feelings towards Americans in uniform? How was he treated as a POW? Will it influence his thoughts on the war on terror?

One soldier spoke up; she was sergeant who teaches catechism classes on base for anyone interested in becoming Catholic. She had a smile from ear to ear as she told me how happy she was about the new pontiff. As she spoke, a crowd of people gathered around us to talk about the new pope. I told them that fifteen years ago when I was living and studying for the priesthood in Rome, I wrote my thesis in part on the theology of Cardinal Ratzinger. I told them how even though he was a powerful cardinal, he lived in a simple apartment near St. Peter's Square. They were delighted to hear how unpretentious and humble a man he is. There is no greater praise from a soldier than to describe a person with high rank as approachable and down-to-earth.

Unlike the media, no one here voiced a concern that he was too conservative. Even if they don't practice what the Church teaches, the young people in the military seemed pleased to know he won't make any doctrinal changes.

My biggest surprise came from the reaction from the eight or nine Protestant chaplains with whom I spoke. They expressed a deep respect and even reverence for the role of the Holy Father, even if he represented a different expression of Christianity. Being in the Middle East with soldiers of all faiths has given me a new appreciation on how significant and influential the papacy is not only to Catholics, but to Christians and non-Christians alike.