



The Holy See

Coat of Arms of His Holiness Benedict XVI



Armour bearings have been in common use by soldiers and the nobility since the Middle Ages. This has given rise to a very specific heraldic language to regulate and describe civic heraldry.

At the same time, an ecclesiastical heraldry for clergy also developed. This heraldic usage follows exactly the same rules as civic heraldry with regard to the composition and definition of the shield, but surrounds it with religious or Church symbols and emblems according to one's ecclesiastical rank in Holy Orders, jurisdiction and dignity.

There is an at least 800-year-old tradition for Popes to have their own personal coat of arms, in addition to the symbols proper to the Apostolic See. Particularly during the Renaissance and the centuries that followed, it was customary to mark with the arms of the reigning Supreme Pontiff all his principal works. Indeed, Papal coats of arms appear on buildings and in various publications,

decrees and documents.

Popes often used their family shield or composed their own with symbols indicating their ideal of life or referring to past events or experiences, or even elements connected with specific Pontifical programmes. At times, they even added a variant to a shield that they had adopted on becoming a Bishop.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, elected Pope and taking the name Benedict XVI, has chosen a coat of arms rich in symbolism and meaning that transmits to history his personality and Pontificate.

A coat of arms consists of a shield bearing several important symbols and surrounded by elements that indicate the person's dignity, rank, title, jurisdiction and more.

The shield chosen by Pope Benedict XVI is very simple: it is in the shape of a chalice, the most commonly used form in ecclesiastical heraldry.

The field of Pope Benedict XVI's shield, different from the composition on his shield as Cardinal, is now *gules* (red), *chape or* (gold). The principal field, in fact, is red.

In each of the upper corners there is a "chape" in gold. The "chape" [cape] is a *symbol of religion*. It indicates an idealism inspired by monastic or, more specifically, Benedictine spirituality. Various Orders and Congregations, such as the Carmelites and the Dominicans, have adopted in their arms the form of the "chape", although the latter only used it in an earlier form rather than their present one. Benedict XIII (1724-1730) of the Order of Preachers used the "Dominican *chief*" [heraldic term: upper part of the field] which is white divided by a black "chape".

Pope Benedict XVI's shield contains symbols he had already used in his arms when he was Archbishop of Munich and Freising, and subsequently as Cardinal. However, they are arranged differently in the new composition.

The principal field of the coat of arms is the central one which is red. At the point of honour of the shield is a large gold shell that has a triple symbolism.

Its first meaning is theological. It is intended to recall a legend attributed to St Augustine. Meeting a child on the beach who was trying to scoop up the sea into a hole in the sand, Augustine asked him what he was doing. The child explained his vain attempt and Augustine took it to refer to his own futile endeavour to encompass the infinity of God within the confines of the limited human mind.

The legend has an obvious spiritual symbolism; it is an invitation to know God, yet with the humility of inadequate human understanding, drawing from the inexhaustible source of theology.

The scallop shell, moreover, has been used for centuries to distinguish pilgrims. Benedict XVI wanted to keep this symbolism alive, treading in the footsteps of John Paul II, a great pilgrim to every corner of the world. The design of large shells that decorated the chasuble he wore at the solemn liturgy for the beginning of his Pontificate, Sunday, 24 April, was most evident.

The scallop is also an emblem that features in the coat of arms of the ancient Monastery of Schotten near Regensburg (Ratisbon) in Bavaria, to which Joseph Ratzinger feels spiritually closely bound.

In the part of the shield called "chape", there are also two symbols that come from the Bavarian tradition which Joseph Ratzinger introduced into his coat of arms when he became Archbishop of Munich and Freising in 1977.

In the dexter corner (to the left of the person looking at it) is a Moor's head in natural colour [*caput Aethiopum*] (brown) with red lips, crown and collar. This is the ancient emblem of the Diocese of Freising, founded in the eighth century, which became a Metropolitan Archdiocese with the name of München und Freising in 1818, subsequent to the Concordat between Pius VII and King Maximilian Joseph of Bavaria (5 June 1817).

The Moor's head is not rare in European heraldry. It still appears today in the arms of Sardinia and Corsica, as well as in the blazons of various noble families. Italian heraldry, however, usually depicts the Moor wearing a white band around his head instead of a crown, indicating a slave who has been freed; whereas in German heraldry the Moor is shown wearing a crown. The Moor's head is common in the Bavarian tradition and is known as the *caput Ethiopicum* or *the Moor of Freising*.

A brown bear, in natural colour, is portrayed in the sinister (left) corner of the shield, with a pack-saddle on its back. An ancient tradition tells that the first Bishop of Freising, St Corbinian (born c. 680 in Châtres, France; died 8 September 730), set out for Rome on horseback. While riding through a forest he was attacked by a bear that tore his horse to pieces. Corbinian not only managed to tame the animal but also to make it carry his baggage to Rome. This explains why the bear is shown carrying a pack. An easy interpretation: the bear tamed by God's grace is the Bishop of Freising himself; the pack saddle is the burden of his Episcopate.

The shield of the Papal coat of arms can therefore be described ("blazoned") in heraldic terms as follows: "Gules, chape in or, with the scallop shell of the second; the dexter chape with a moor's head in natural colour, crowned and collared of the first, the sinister chape a bear trippant in natural colour, carrying a pack gules belted sable".

The shield carries the symbols connected to the person who displays it, to his ideals, traditions, programmes of life and the principles that inspire and guide him. The various symbols of rank,

dignity and jurisdiction of the individual appear instead around the shield.

It has been a venerable tradition for the Supreme Pontiff to surround his armorial shield with crossed keys, one gold and the other silver, in the form of a St Andrew's cross: these have been variously interpreted as symbols of spiritual and temporal power. They appear behind the shield or above it, and are quite prominent.

Matthew's Gospel recounts that Christ said to Peter: "I will entrust to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you declare bound on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you declare loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16: 19). The keys are therefore the typical symbol of the power that Christ gave to St Peter and his Successors. Thus, it is only right that they appear in every Papal coat of arms.

In secular heraldry there is always some form of headpiece above the shield, usually a crown. In ecclesiastical heraldry it is also common for a headpiece to be shown, but obviously of an ecclesiastical kind.

The Supreme Pontiff's arms have featured a "tiara" since ancient times. At the beginning this was a sort of closed "tocque". In 1130 a crown was added, symbol of the Church's sovereignty over the States.

Boniface VIII, in 1301, added a second crown, at the time of the confrontation with Philip the Fair, King of France, to show that his spiritual authority was superior to any civic authority.

It was Benedict XII in 1342 who added a third crown to symbolize the Pope's moral authority over all secular monarchs, and reaffirmed the possession of Avignon.

With time, although it lost its temporal meaning, the silver tiara with three gold crowns came to represent the three powers of the Supreme Pontiff: Sacred Orders, Jurisdiction and Magisterium.

In past centuries, Popes wore the tiara at solemn official celebrations and especially on the day of the "coronation" at the beginning of their Pontificate. Paul VI used for this purpose a precious tiara which the Archdiocese of Milan had presented to him, just as it had given one to Pius XI; but afterwards, Paul VI donated it to a charity and introduced the current use of a simple "mitre", although these mitres were sometimes embellished with ornaments or gems. But he left the "tiara" and the crossed keys as the emblem of the Apostolic See.

Today, the ceremony that begins a Pontificate is no longer called a "coronation". The Pope's full jurisdiction begins the moment he accepts his election by the Cardinals in the Conclave and not with coronation as for secular monarchs. This ceremony, therefore, is simply called the solemn inauguration of his Petrine Ministry, as it was for Benedict XVI on 24 April.

The Holy Father Benedict XVI decided not to include the tiara in his official personal coat of arms. He replaced it with a simple mitre which is not, therefore, surmounted by a small globe and cross as was the tiara.

The Papal mitre shown in his arms, to recall the symbolism of the tiara, is silver and bears three bands of gold (the three powers: Orders, Jurisdiction and Magisterium), joined at the centre to show their unity in the same person.

On the other hand, there is also a completely new symbol in the arms of Pope Benedict XVI: the "pallium". It is not part of the tradition, at least in recent years, for the Supreme Pontiffs to include it in their arms.

Yet the pallium is the typical liturgical insignia of the Supreme Pontiff and frequently appears in ancient portrayals of Popes. It stands for the Pope's responsibility as Pastor of the flock entrusted to him by Christ.

In early centuries the Popes used a real lambskin draped over their shoulders. This was later replaced by a stole of white wool woven with the pure wool of lambs reared specially for the purpose. It was decorated with several crosses that were generally black in the early centuries, or occasionally red. Already by the fourth century the pallium had become a liturgical symbol proper to and characteristic of the Pope.

The Pope's conferral of the pallium upon Metropolitan Archbishops began in the sixth century. Their obligation to postulate the pallium after their appointment is attested as far back as the ninth century.

In the famous long iconographic series of medallions in St Paul's Basilica that portrays all the Popes of history (the earliest portrayals are idealized), many Supreme Pontiffs are shown wearing the pallium, especially those between the fifth and 14th centuries.

The pallium is therefore not only the symbol of Papal jurisdiction, but also the explicit and brotherly sign of sharing this jurisdiction with the Metropolitan Archbishops, and through them, with their suffragan Bishops. It is thus the visible sign of collegiality and subsidiarity.

In heraldry in general, both civic and ecclesiastical (particularly for lower ranks), it is customary to place a ribbon or cartouche below the shield, bearing a motto or a heraldic device. It expresses in a few words an ideal or a programme of life.

In his Episcopal arms, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had chosen the motto "Cooperatores Veritatis". This remains his aspiration or personal programme but does not appear in his Papal arms, in accordance with the tradition common to the Supreme Pontiffs' arms in recent centuries.

We all remember that John Paul II would often quote his motto, "Totus Tuus", although it did not feature in his Papal arms. The absence of a motto in the Pope's arms implies openness without exclusion to all ideals that may derive from faith, hope and charity.

Mons. Andrea Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo
Apostolic Nuncio

©Copyright - Libreria Editrice Vaticana