

Cardinal Joachim Meisner

Host of Cologne's World Youth Day 2005

By Lucy Gordan



Cardinal Joachim Meisner, archbishop of Cologne, was born on Christmas Day, 1933, in Breslau in Silesia, when this heavily-forested region was still part of Germany. After its "liberation" in 1944 by Soviet troops, Silesia became part of Poland, and Breslau was renamed Wrocław.

Meisner was ordained on December 22, 1962, and elected bishop on March 17, 1975. While he was serving as bishop of Berlin from 1980 to 1988, he was created cardinal on February 2, 1983 and became the archbishop of Cologne on December 20, 1988.

In February, during a press trip to Germany, courtesy of New York City's German National Tourist Organization, Lucy Gordan asked Meisner about World Youth Day to take place next August in Cologne, about his childhood, his vocation, his work, and his interpretation and aspirations for the modern Church in his archdiocese in Cologne near the city's magnificent Gothic cathedral, resting place of the relics of the Three Magi.

Before we talk about World Youth Day, I know *Inside the Vatican* readers would like to know more about you, Your Eminence. Let's start at the beginning. Please describe your childhood briefly.

JOACHIM MEISNER: *Mein Gott*. I have a very complicated biography that is all entwined with Germany's contemporary history.

I grew up in Silesia until it was invaded by the Red Army in May 1944 and we were displaced. My father, who was later killed, was away in the army. My three brothers — I am the second of four boys — and our mother fled to Dresden. It was only by a miracle that we survived the Anglo-American bombing in February 1945. Its 60th anniversary is being commemorated next weekend.

Would you mind telling us about this traumatic experience?

JOACHIM MEISNER: We refugees from Silesia were in

Dresden's main railroad station when the bombs started to fall. I had just turned twelve. Remember it was February. We were barefoot and wearing pajamas. We had nothing else to our name. We even lost what little we had been able to carry when we fled from Silesia. It was a miracle that we — all five of us — survived. We felt lucky. My older brother was fourteen. The others were seven and five. We went to live in Körner, in Thüringen.

Do your brothers still live in Thüringen?

JOACHIM MEISNER: Yes. I have 10 nieces and nephews. Between them my brothers have 36 grand-children. The last one was born yesterday. We are all very close, thanks to our mother's love and example.

When I was bishop of Berlin the Holy Father told me that the left side of my heart was Communist, the right side democratic, and my whole heart Catholic.

You must have missed a lot of school because of the war...?

JOACHIM MEISNER: Yes, I did. Then in Thüringen there was no *gymnasium* or high school for studying the humanities just after the war. I studied banking, bank management instead. I even worked in a bank for a while and then went back to *gymnasium*.

You must have been very studious. What were your favorite subjects?

JOACHIM MEISNER: Yes, I still love to study. My favorite subjects were German, history, ancient Greek and Latin. I was very good at writing in German. I still find it easy to write my homilies.

I speak German, Polish, and Russian. We were not allowed to study English in school. It was the language of capitalists.

Who were your heroes?

JOACHIM MEISNER: My parish priest. I also admired very much the Pope of my childhood, Pius XII. The historical figure that I love very much, that I feel linked to, is the Empress Maria Teresa, the wife of Kaiser Franz Josef. Her 16th child was archbishop of Cologne. It's impressive how she was able to rule the world and have 16 children at the same time. I almost forgot to mention how much I admire the courage of Cardinals Mindszenty of Hungary and Stepinac of Croatia.

You've always admired Pius XII who before

becoming Pope was legate to Germany, so you agree that Pius XII should be canonized?

JOACHIM MEISNER: Of course. It's not fair to blame him for not saving enough Jews. He should not be the scapegoat for the Holocaust. He was well-known and well-loved all around the world by many great statesmen before *Kristallnacht*, and then overnight he became a *persona non grata*. He was not responsible for the Holocaust. He could never have stopped it alone. Everybody should accept the possibility of Pius XII's canonization.

You worked in business before becoming a priest; exactly what did you do?

JOACHIM MEISNER: As I told you, I studied banking and worked in a bank before going to *gymnasium*.

So when did you feel your calling, your vocation?

JOACHIM MEISNER: For as long as I can remember. Always, even as a small child. Even when I was still too small to go to nursery school, one night I went for a walk with my parents. A comet shot across the sky and my mother told me to make a wish. She told me that, if you see a comet and make a wish, it comes true. I wished to become a priest.

Your vocation has been tested many times, hasn't it?

JOACHIM MEISNER: Yes, my vocation was influenced by the historical events that took place during my youth. When I was born Hitler was already in power. Then as a young man, when I worked in a bank, I

worked under the daily threat, terror, injustice of Communism.

How old were you when you decided to become a priest? Why?

JOACHIM MEISNER: I couldn't imagine my life except as a priest. I can't really pinpoint it to any particular event. I always felt it. I was 22 when I entered the seminary and 29, three days before my 30th birthday, when I was ordained. I believed and still do that under Communism the Church offered a real margin of freedom. It followed the teachings, the actions of Christ. I became a priest because I wanted to work for freedom, especially for religious freedom.

What did your mother think?



"I'VE ALWAYS THOUGHT OF
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JOACHIM MEISNER: My mother said, "If that's God's will, you must follow his guidance." My family was very poor, but it was astonishing how much my mother and brothers helped me, how they supported me.

Have you ever doubted your vocation and faith?

JOACHIM MEISNER: No, never. As soon as I finished my studies, I was appointed the vice-director of my seminary in Erfurt, but I didn't feel qualified for the position because I'd never had doubts about my vocation and didn't know how to counsel the seminarians who were having doubts.

In Thüringen we had a diaspora situation. Most of the population was agnostic, of Protestant origin. There were no Catholic churches. There were about 2,000 Catholic refugees, living in three villages, with only one priest for all of them. The first Mass that I officiated at was in an Evangelical Church because there wasn't a Catholic one.

Do you have a favorite saint? Why?

JOACHIM MEISNER: Yes, without a doubt, the Blessed Mother because Jesus himself gave her to me as a friend. Still nailed to the cross, he said to St. John: "She is your mother," and then St. John took her into his house, and that is what I did.

Do you have a favorite parable?

JOACHIM MEISNER: I don't have a favorite parable; I have a favorite Bible story. It's in the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, where the little child gives Jesus his fish and Jesus multiplies them.

Why?

JOACHIM MEISNER: Why is a very important reason for me. Would you like to know the story? It goes like this. In 1975 I received a letter from Pope Paul VI appointing me bishop. I had to accept or refuse by the next day. In making my decision I was allowed to consult only two people: my spiritual director, a Franciscan in Erfurt, and my father confessor. I didn't find either one of them, so I took a Bible, closed my eyes, and prayed to God to give me an answer. Then I opened the Bible arbitrarily, to any page. It was Chapter 6 of St. John. God answered my prayer: "You are like the little child with the fish. When you open your heart to Jesus, and you give what little you have to him, the two fish, he'll multiply them and create something important out of your gift."

You are now the cardinal of Cologne; before that you were the bishop of Berlin, and earlier still the director of Caritas. Where was your first parish?

JOACHIM MEISNER: I was the chaplain of a small community in Reidsfeld. It is a Catholic region in former East Germany. From Reidsfeld I went back to Erfurt, where I worked as a co-pastor of St. Giles Parish, Heiligenstadt, and Holy Cross, Erfurt, and was the diocesan director at Caritas. Then I was elected titular bishop of Vina and the auxiliary bishop in Erfurt

20TH WORLD YOUTH DAY COLOGNE 2005 FESTIVAL OF FAITH IN THE HEART OF EUROPE

From Tuesday, August 16th to Sunday, August 21st, young Christians from all over the world will gather in Cologne for a great festival of faith. The motto for this 20th World Youth Day is: "We have come to adore him" (*Matthew 2:2*).

Eight of the 19 World Youth Days so far have been international: 1987 Buenos Aires (Argentina), 1989 Santiago de Compostela (Spain), 1991 Czestochowa (Poland), 1993 Denver (USA), 1995 Manila (Philippines), 1997 Paris (France), 2000 Rome (Italy), and 2002 Toronto (Canada). With 4,000,000 in attendance, Manila hosted the largest crowd.



About 800,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 30 traveled to Toronto and organizers in Cologne expect an even bigger number: between one and two million believers. From Italy alone, almost 100,000 believers are expected to make the pilgrimage to Cologne. In addition, 600 bishops will be coming to the cathedral city; about 4,000 journalists will report on the event; and around 20,000 volunteers will ensure that the whole event will run smoothly.

The 20th World Youth Day (*Weltjugendtag* in German) will officially open on the afternoon of August 16 when Cardinal Joachim Meisner will celebrate Mass for an estimated 400,000 participants in the Rhine Meadows in Cologne's district of Poll on the right bank of the Rhine across from the majestic Gothic cathedral. Upon his arrival on Thursday, August 18th, the Holy Father will be greeted at a welcome ceremony, also with Cardinal Meisner officiating, to be held in Poll. On Saturday, August 20th, there will be a vigil with the Holy Father at the airfield of Sankt Augustin-Hangelar, around 35 kilometers or 20 miles south of Cologne. At the same site, World Youth Day will reach its climax with a large closing Mass on Sunday to be celebrated by the pontiff.

In addition to the above cornerstone events, there will be a Way of the Cross, catecheses in around 400 venues, and prayer services, and musical, theatrical, and dance performances on over 90 stages in churches and public squares in Cologne, Düsseldorf, and Bonn. All important information about World Youth Day, and the five days (August 11-15) preceding it, called Days of Encounter in the German dioceses all over the country, is available online: www.wjt2005.de or www.wyd2005.org. Both sites are regularly updated and applications for artists and volunteers are submitted via these sites. Otherwise inquiries should be addressed to the WYD multi-lingual helpline: -0049-(0)221-49 2005-0. Inexpensive accommodations can be arranged on the KölnTourismus online reservation system: www.koelntourismus.de.

from 1975 through 1980, before I became the bishop of Berlin.

You were ordained in 1962. Please assess the reforms of Vatican II and what came after.

JOACHIM MEISNER: Before I answer, I'd like to make a short remark. As I've told you, in December of 1962 I became a priest. When two months earlier — in October — my spiritual director in Erfurt was sent to Rome to help with Vatican II, Erfurt's auxiliary bishop told us seminarians to pray very hard for the success of Vatican II, because historically Councils have always created problems and inner struggles within the Church and those will be the debates and problems that you will have to address and solve once you are priests. The auxiliary bishop was a wise old man, but we were young and just scoffed at his warnings. Now I know what he said was not so far from the truth.

In gist then, do you think that Vatican II created a great many problems for the Church?

JOACHIM MEISNER: Yes, but if Vatican II hadn't taken place, we would have had problems and debates anyway. Many of the problems that came after the Council occurred because what was said and written at the Council was not interpreted correctly. People who interpret what went on at Vatican II, but haven't read the documents, speak with preconceptions, with no basis for their interpretations. They should read the documents before speaking. Many of my fellow-churchmen interpreted Vatican II based on the interpretations of others who had not read the documents.

What about the liturgy; do you prefer the Mass in Latin or in the vernacular? Why?

JOACHIM MEISNER: It's the same. I like to say the Mass in Latin, but also in my mother-tongue.

When you were bishop of Berlin, you tried to be a bridge between the West and the East of the city, residing in East Berlin. How was it possible for you to go back and forth in spite of the Wall?

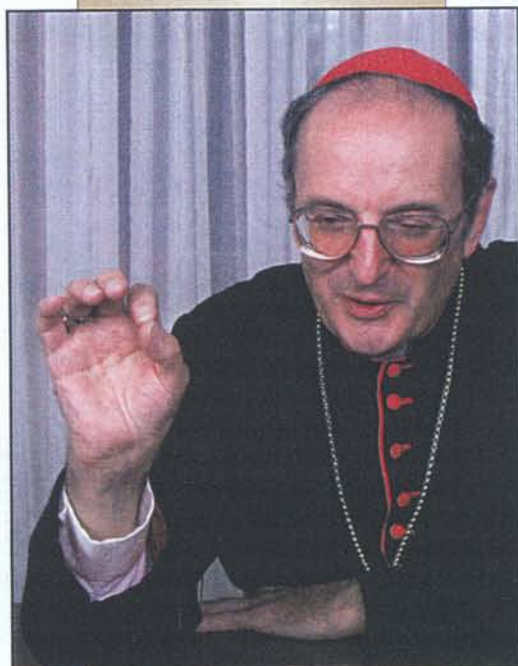
JOACHIM MEISNER: East and West Berlin were divided by the Wall but not the Catholic Church. It was seen as a world church and not as a national church. I was allowed to travel to the West ten days a month, but I had to be back in my East Berlin archdiocese by 12 AM each night. Around 826,000 of my parishioners were East-Berliners. I always thought of the Church as a light-

house of hope and truth.

Have you been to Russia? What do you think of Putin? Of "Russia will be converted"? Of the work of *Kirche in Not*?

JOACHIM MEISNER: Yes, of course, I've been to Russia. As for Putin, when I was the archbishop of Berlin, he also lived in East Berlin. He was a Soviet spy. I didn't know him. I hope that he will change and start building a democratic republic in Russia.

"Russia will be converted" and *Kirche in Not* are two very different things and cannot be compared. "Russia will be converted" was a warning of Our Lady of Fatima who on July 13, 1917 said: "I shall come to ask for the consecration of Russia to my Immaculate Heart.... If my requests are heeded, Russia will be converted, and there will be peace; if not, she will spread her errors throughout the world, causing wars and persecutions of the Church." The *Kirche in Not* or *Aid to the Church in Need* is a worldwide Catholic aid organization. It provides material aid and pastoral care to refugees, rebuilds dilapidated and destroyed churches, supports poor seminarians with their training, broadcasts high-quality religious programs, provides transportation to desperately poor priests and nuns in remote parishes, and brings the Word of God to impoverished people. The German branch helps the churches in Eastern Europe. In emergencies it has also helped the Russian Orthodox Church.



"HISTORY WILL JUDGE JOHN PAUL II LIKE LEO AND GREGORY, JOHN PAUL 'THE GREAT.'"

As bishop of Berlin you obviously were a key figure in the defeat of Communism; what do you consider your goals and achievements as cardinal of Cologne?

JOACHIM MEISNER: I don't know. It is hard to say. Maybe my biggest achievement will turn out to be my smallest and my smallest will turn out to be my biggest. You have to ask other people, not me, that question.

After being such a key figure for the Church, when you were the bishop of Berlin, in comparison isn't your job in Cologne boring, an anti-climax?

JOACHIM MEISNER: It's exactly the opposite. The Church in Cologne is world important; all of the Church's international organizations are headquartered here in Cologne, which is Germany's biggest and richest archdiocese. Only since being the archbishop of Cologne have I been able to go to South America, Japan, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Sadly, I've never been to Australia. Because my responsibilities, headquartered

here in Cologne, cover the world, I also have a lot of business to carry out in Vatican City and must go there often. Sometimes I feel that my abilities are overstretched because I have too much to do.

Germany is a rich church — people pay in taxes. But people are fleeing from this payment and leaving the Church officially to do so. Hundreds of thousands have done it. Is the structure tottering?

JOACHIM MEISNER: Yes, definitely but, because in Germany you have to pay taxes — tithes — to the Church, any Church, this flight from the Church is documented and so people talk about it. In other countries people are leaving the Church too, but, since it's not documented, it's ignored. In many countries a much higher percent of people are leaving or have left the Church than in Germany.

What are your goals for the future?

JOACHIM MEISNER: In this Third Millennium everyone needs to make a concerted effort to rediscover the sense of community, of belonging, so as to combat egoism and isolation. We also have to be careful that our Church of the future be in the image of God, following the model of His original Church. Of course, times have changed, but we cannot conceive the Church in our image, according to our point of view.

No longer having the need to fight Communism and to maintain one's faith in secret, do you consider present Europe's culture vibrant or decadent?

JOACHIM MEISNER: Our society has become too hedonistic and liberal. It's ironic that today many people suffer from depression.

World Youth Day in August will be no. 20. How is the venue chosen?

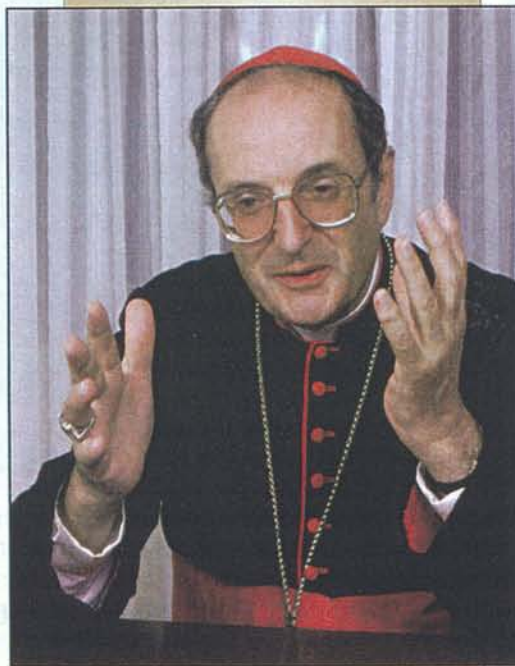
JOACHIM MEISNER: Since 1986 Pope John Paul II has invited young people from all over the world to participate in World Youth Days. He was motivated to do so by two large-scale international youth meetings in Rome; the first took place in 1984, the Holy Year of Redemption, the other in 1985, the International Year of Youth. His Holiness chose and announced Cologne as the next venue at the final Mass of Toronto's World Youth Day in 2002.

What do you hope will be the results of Cologne's

World Youth Day?

JOACHIM MEISNER: The goal of all World Youth Days — one of John Paul II's main concerns — is a renewal of evangelization that aims to reach young people. World Youth Day is an opportunity for young people to discover what His Holiness calls the "young and modern mystery of the Church" in the common experience of pilgrimage, prayer, and worship. The German Church hopes to get a younger face. Typically in Germany old people attend Mass; hopefully World Youth Day will bring young people to church.

(SPEAKING BEFORE THE
DEATH OF JOHN PAUL II):
"WE HAVE A POPE RIGHT
NOW. WHEN THE POPE
DIES, I'LL ASK THE HOLY
SPIRIT FOR GUIDANCE"



You grew up under the Nazis and became a priest under the Communists. Is the world a more hopeful place today?

JOACHIM MEISNER: I'm 71 years old and spent 55 years of my life under dictators. Yet you can live by the Bible and its teachings under any dictator or any kind of political regime. Sometimes I get the feeling that people don't know how to live with, take advantage of their freedom. My biography is very similar to the Pope's. We both have lived under dictators and we have both fought all our lives for the dignity of mankind.

Do you agree with the Holy Father's position against the war in Iraq?

JOACHIM MEISNER: Of course.

Your background, struggles, and philosophy are similar to the Holy Father's; how do you think history will judge him: John Paul "The Great," John Paul "The Instinctive," John Paul "The Charismatic," John Paul "The Conservative," John Paul "The Poor Administrator"?

JOACHIM MEISNER: Like Leo and Gregory, John Paul "The Great."

As you know, because of his long papacy, his battle with a degenerative disease, and his recent hospitalization, there is a lot of speculation about the identity of his successor. Some observers say an Italian cardinal; others say Ratzinger; some indicate you as a conservative long-shot. Who will be the next Pope?

JOACHIM MEISNER: That an impossible question to answer. It's as if a wife says to her dying husband: I'm going to marry him, and then him after you die. When, because I'm a cardinal, someone asks me who I'm going to choose as the next Pope, I answer, "You know what, we have a Pope right now. When the Pope dies, I'll ask the Holy Spirit for guidance."