

[Pope John Paul II, 1920-2005]

Upon This Rock

Defender of an unfashionable morality

By Thomas E. Woods Jr.

ALTHOUGH Pope John Paul II's health had been visibly declining for years, his death in April still came as a shock to a great many Catholics and non-Catholics alike. In an age of mass media he became the most visible and widely traveled pope in history, and Vatican observers agreed that he would be an immensely difficult act to follow.

It will be interesting to see how historians assess his pontificate. The mainstream media's routine characterization of Karol Wojtyla as a conservative obscures the many ways in which this son of Poland was a truly enigmatic figure. For Wojtyla, and later John Paul II, cannot be so easily pigeonholed. To be sure, he upheld traditional Catholic teaching on abortion, artificial contraception, homosexuality, and a great many other issues. But (to take one example among many) he gave a peccatorial cross, a symbol of authority, to the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury—whose moral views are quite scandalous to Catholic sensibilities—in spite of Pope Leo XIII's statement on the invalidity of Anglican orders. Accused of insensitivity to women, John Paul, a fervent opponent of women priests, in 1994 permitted female altar servers—a capitulation that stunned and demoralized even many of his staunchest supporters.

But that is by no means the whole story of John Paul II. When he issued

Veritatis Splendor (1993), a lengthy encyclical on moral theology, even the traditionalist Society of Saint Pius X cheered. The late Michael Davies, the most prolific traditionalist writer in the English-speaking world, had nothing but praise for John Paul's Holy Office—known since Vatican II as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF)—for what he called its consistently orthodox statements, particularly in the area of medical ethics, where Catholic moral principles frequently needed to be applied to previously unheard-of situations.

Among the bishops today, again contrary to media portrayals, there are next to no conservatives or traditionalists of the mold, say, of Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani, one of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's predecessors at the Holy Office. John Paul himself was a fervent believer in the program of Vatican II, properly understood, and belonged to the center-right of a Vatican spectrum well to the left of where it had been in the days of Pius XII. Thus while he was certainly no traditionalist, as the many innovations of his pontificate reveal, John Paul was a consistent disappointment to self-described progressives, who sought more radical revolution in the church. He would have no truck with the ordination of women to the priesthood, which he insisted was beyond the church's

authority, and he would not relax the rule of priestly celibacy despite growing pressure to do so.

To hear the Left tell it, John Paul was a merciless disciplinarian and a pontiff who concentrated all power in his hands. On his way to Rome for the pope's funeral, Bill Clinton claimed that John Paul "centralized authority in the papacy again." Nothing could be further from the truth: John Paul's governing style was in fact relatively *laissez faire*, and in the spirit of collegiality he generally deferred to the judgment of local bishops. James Hitchcock, a conservative Catholic professor at Saint Louis University, describes John Paul as "a relatively permissive pope. He has an image of a hardheaded conservative, which is probably based mostly on his words, but he has not been a disciplinarian."

To be sure, then, this was a man who defied simple categorization. These nuances notwithstanding, the image Pope John Paul II projected to the world was that of a defender of immortal wisdom and moral precept. And it was that to which so many people responded.

Karol Wojtyla was not especially well known before his elevation to the papacy in 1978, and in fact when his name was announced from the balcony of St. Peter's that October, at least one

observer in the perplexed crowd exclaimed that the cardinals had elected an African. But once it became clear that the new pope, who took the name John Paul II (in honor of Pope John XXIII and Paul VI, the popes of Vatican II), was a Pole, few could miss the significance of what the College of Cardinals had done. For how could the election of a pope from a country behind the Iron Curtain not be viewed as a direct challenge to the Soviet Union and its domination of Eastern Europe?

That, in fact, was precisely how the Kremlin did interpret the elevation of Cardinal Wojtyla to the papacy. And when the pope announced the following year that he wished to travel to his homeland, Communist authorities panicked. Weeks before the pope's visit, the Polish Communist Party sent a cautionary memo to schoolteachers. "The pope is our enemy," it stated flatly. "Due to his uncommon skills and great sense of humor he is dangerous, because he charms everyone, especially journalists. Because of the activation of the Church in Poland our activities designed to atheize the youth not only cannot diminish but must intensely develop.... In this respect all means are allowed and we cannot afford any sentiments."

The largest crowd ever assembled in Poland's history, perhaps two or three million, gathered for the pope's June 10 mass. Looking around at so many of their fellow countrymen, the Poles realized in dramatic fashion just how numerous were those who were prepared to defy the regime and, by contrast, how few the Communists were.

Anna Bohdziewicz was an underground book distributor around the time of the pope's initial visit to Poland. "I think it broke some kind of fear," she said. "I'm sure because suddenly people saw that there were a lot of people who feel the same, who think the same, and

this was a kind of power." Krzysztof Rybicki, the pope's boyhood friend, felt the same way. "We had the feeling of something happening. We also could count ourselves and say, 'Look! We are so many!'"

"Fifty percent of the collapse of Communism is his doing," said Solidarity leader and former Polish president Lech Walesa last month. Just over a year after the pope's visit, Solidarity was able to organize 10 million Poles against the regime. "Earlier we tried, I tried, and we couldn't do it," Walesa recalled. "These are facts." Without the leadership of John Paul, "Communism would have fallen, but much later and in a bloody way."

Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the Solidarity activist who later became Poland's first elected prime minister after the collapse of the Communist regime, pointed to the pope's visit as an essential starting point for the freedom movement. Thanks to that event, he said, "society felt its strength and saw that it was able to organize itself against the existing system—and especially toward a peaceful fight.... When martial law was implemented [in late 1981], the pope never gave up. He constantly spoke about Solidarity—about holding it up and keeping it alive."

Even the mainstream media acknowledges this. In the wake of John Paul's death, commentators across the political spectrum gave credit where it was due and honored the pope for the inspiration he gave to opponents of Communism. "Pope Helped Overthrow Communism in Europe," read the Associated Press headline on April 1.

What kinds of things did he tell the Poles? Peggy Noonan recalled some of John Paul's remarks in her own tribute to the late pontiff. In the midst of an atheistic regime he appealed to Poland's thousand years of Catholic belief:

With what argument, what reasoning, what value held by the will or the heart does one bring oneself, one's loved ones, one's countrymen and nation to reject, to say 'no' to Him with whom we have all lived for one thousand years? He who formed the basis of our identity and has Himself remained its basis ever since....

As a bishop does in the sacrament of Confirmation so do I today extend my hands in that apostolic gesture over all who are gathered here today, my compatriots. And so I speak for Christ himself: 'Receive the Holy Spirit!'

I speak too for St. Paul: 'Do not quench the Spirit!'

I speak again for St. Paul: 'Do not grieve the Spirit of God!'

You must be strong, my brothers and sisters! You must be strong with the strength that faith gives! You must be strong with the strength of faith! You must be faithful! You need this strength today more than any other period of our history....

Never lose your trust, do not be defeated, do not be discouraged.... Always seek spiritual power from Him from whom countless generations of our fathers and mothers have found it. Never detach yourselves from Him. Never lose your spiritual freedom.

The Soviet Union's obvious displeasure both at the election of this Polish pope and at the inspiration he gave to anti-Communist elements behind the Iron Curtain fueled speculation that the Kremlin may have been behind the failed assassination attempt on John Paul II by Turkish gunman Mehmet Ali Agca in May 1981. Such speculation may not have been far off: according to recent

reports in two major Italian newspapers, *Corriere della Sera* and *Il Giornale*, documents found in the archives of the old East German secret service implicate the Communists in the assassination attempt, which they say was carried out by the Bulgarian secret service.

John Paul himself, who later met with Ali Agca in jail and forgave the man who had shot him, always suspected that the gunman was part of a larger plot. "Ali Agca is, as everyone says, a professional assassin," the pope wrote in his book *Memory and Identity*. "Which means that the assassination was not his initiative, that someone else thought of it, someone else gave the order." A charismatic pope who traveled widely, moved easily among the people, and—especially—rallied the Poles against their oppressors was, apparently, too much for Communist authorities to bear.

But the overthrow of Communism, as John Paul well knew, was a necessary but not sufficient condition for re-establishing in Eastern Europe the kind of decent and dignified life that befits human beings. Returning to Poland for a fourth time in mid-1991, well after the collapse of the Communist regime, the pope made clear his displeasure at the direction of Polish society and of Europe in general:

Giving in to desire, to sex, to consumption: that is the Europeanism that some supporters of our entry into Europe think we should accept. But we mustn't become part of that Europe. We were the ones who created Europe, and with much more effort than those who claim exclusive rights to Europeanism. What is their criterion? Freedom. But which freedom? The freedom to take the life of an unborn child? Brothers and sisters, I protest against this concept of Europe held by the West. And this

message must be shouted loudly from this land of martyrs. Europe is waiting for redemption. The world needs a redeemed Europe.

When you listen to young priests and seminarians speak of John Paul, what they recall about him with the most fondness was the impression he gave of a man who was immovable on matters of moral principle. Young people, they say, are suffering from a vacuum of moral leadership and John Paul, alone among world leaders, was able to fill that vacuum. If they're looking for someone who slavishly conforms to political and moral fashion, they can find him in any of the interchangeable mediocrities who have ruled the nations of the West for the past half century. When John Paul urged them to be the light of the world and to resist what he unforgettably labeled the culture of death, he was reminding them that there was another way to live apart from the mere gratification of their appetites.

It was in this context in *Veritatis Splendor* that the pope recalled the words of Saint Paul:

Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of the light (for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful words of darkness, but instead expose them.... Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. (Eph. 5:8-11, 15-16; cf. 1 Th. 5:4-8)

John Paul emphatically insisted that the fundamental problem with Communism had been moral and spiritual, not economic, and yet even in this latter category the pope had much of value to say.

Although John Paul favored the same kinds of protections for workers on which his predecessors had insisted, his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus* nevertheless acknowledged the material and moral significance of the market economy. It is true that Pope Leo XIII, who condemned socialism in his seminal *Rerum Novarum* (1891), had never condemned capitalism *per se*, although he did believe that some forms of state intervention into the marketplace were desirable. Still, the church's leadership had often been skeptical of the market economy; Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) criticized capitalism in perhaps the most hostile language of any of the major social encyclicals. In *Populorum Progressio* (1967), Pope Paul VI even lent the support of the Chair of Peter to foreign-aid programs and state-led development schemes that were being denounced by free-market economists and which more and more observers now concede wound up harming the nations they were intended to help.

Under John Paul, the church began to make its peace with the market economy. According to Acton Institute president Fr. Robert Sirico, *Centesimus* "represents the beginning of a shift away from the static, zero-sum economic worldview that led the church to be suspicious of the system of free exchange and to argue for wealth distribution as the only moral response to poverty. Clearly, John Paul II has incorporated the developments in economic science since the time of Keynes. Not only does the encyclical synthesize advances in economics with Catholic normative principles, but it also reaffirms the autonomy of economics as a legitimate and positive discipline."

John Paul also spent the past quarter century as a consistent voice for peace. Most recently, he was an outspoken opponent of the Bush administration's drive toward war with Iraq. John Nichols

reminds us that in addition to meetings with British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, both Bush allies, in order to try to stave off the war, the pope also sent Cardinal Pio Laghi to the United States as a special envoy for the same purpose.

For his opposition to U.S. wars, John Paul II earned the withering contempt of so many of the neoconservatives who can be heard to praise him now. "The Bush Administration," wrote Joseph D'Hippolito in a charming little article for David Horowitz's FrontPageMag.com in May 2004, "should consider placing the Vatican on the list of rogue states that support terrorism." After all, what reason other than support for terrorism could anyone have for opposing the American Jacobins who control U.S. foreign policy? The neocons had better get used to it, however, since the next pope is certain to have the same views on international affairs as John Paul and by virtue of being younger and more physically vigorous will be an even more formidable opponent.

Only the passage of time will reveal how religious historians will evaluate the pontificate of John Paul II in terms of its legacy for the Catholic Church. Yet it is clear enough how historians of the 20th-century will evaluate him as a global statesman. He will be remembered the way the media portrayed him: as a defender of unfashionable moral principles before a world determined to flout them. And even his toughest critics have to concede, as the secular world does, John Paul's role in lighting the fire that culminated in Solidarity and the eventual collapse of the Soviet empire. It is for these traits that Catholics, looking back on the third-longest pontificate in church history, rightly honor him. ■

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[fall of the House of Windsor]

Courting Disaster

Monarchy has served England well, but now her prince hastens its decline.

By Peter Hitchens

THE LAST GREAT MONARCHY in the world is in the process of cutting its own throat. Should anybody care? Or is the proper response to shrug, smile, and pass by? Many conservative Americans are unable to understand Britain's continued adherence to this strange institution, seeing it as a survival from our national childhood that we have not yet found the courage to put away.

They may be right about the appeal of crowns and thrones to the child in us, in one way. All nations first seek to make their citizens love them in infancy, and the country that has no appeal to its children is unlikely to be much liked by them when they grow up. There is something about the word "king," with its echoes of chivalry and honor, that touches the heart in a way that the word "president" never can.

But they may also be dangerously wrong in an era in which the expression "democracy" is coming more and more to be used to describe a dogmatic, intolerant ideology frequently indifferent to liberty and often hostile to it. It is worth noting that, of the six longest-surviving law-governed democracies on the planet, four are constitutional monarchies (Britain, Australia, Canada, and Sweden) and two (Switzerland and the United States) are republics. The 49th parallel has long been the most interesting frontier in the world because it marks the division not between two hos-

tile and distinct peoples or two rival empires but between two different English ideas about how to be free.

Seldom has the United States' choice seemed so beset with difficulties, with the great republic's unending state of proclaimed war serving as a pretext for monstrous executive power and the blithe spurning of supposedly sacrosanct principle. This might be a good moment to examine the strengths of America's only real rival in the continuous preservation of ordered liberty, if only because the world will sooner or later recover from its present delusions, and civilized people will once again be seeking the essence of the good society. Such a society, once discovered, does not necessarily endure. Those who are in it do not always understand what is good about it, why it survives or what should be done to defend it. In attempting to save it, they can easily destroy it.

The grandeur and mystery of the English monarchy departed long ago, blasted away by familiarity and by television's greed for fake intimacy. This is an appetite that can never be satisfied, especially by an institution whose majesty has to be maintained by very ordinary mortals. Brilliant and charismatic beings could never stand the humble, middle-class drudgery and plain duty required of the British royal family. Its dignity was ruptured by the mad soap opera of Princess Diana's