

April 17, 2005

Reflections on John Paul II: "Yes and Yet"

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CATHOLIC NEW TIMES (Toronto, Canada), 29.7

Given the emotional outpouring elicited by his death, few can be objective about Pope John Paul II's life and legacy. However, especially regarding his legacy, I find it encapsulated in the title of one of his best-selling books: it was a "sign of contradiction."

Regarding his life itself, I was edified at how he touched so many young people. It may have been his principled convictions that evoked something in them as they searched for meaning. It may also have arisen from his evident commitment to Jesus Christ. As he aged, I liked his struggle to keep going as his illnesses took over, even though I would have been more impressed had he not clung to the power of the papacy and, instead, simply resigned as his body failed him. I thought God was telling him in his ailments that he should resign; yet he indicated he was waiting for some other kind of sign. Most of all I was deeply moved when he visited his attempted assassin; to this day I carry the Time magazine that covered that visit and speak about its accompanying essay: "Why Forgive?" Indeed here he offered a model to the world that has yet to be emulated.

I agree with those who have admired how he promoted the image of the institutional Roman Church as a force speaking about universal human rights, the need for respect for religious differences, and the promotion of life in a culture of violence and death. I felt proud about his principled stance on the Gulf War and the Iraqi War, his nuanced way in which he accepted capitalism as he pointed to its "savage" side, his link of secular atheism with consumerism, and his successful effort to move many Catholics in my country to a different position on the death penalty. While he seemed to give unqualified support to "Solidarity" in Poland, to this day I don't know why he oversaw the undermining of liberation theology, bishops and catechetical efforts in Latin America.

Since I believe the main role of the successor of Peter is not to be a public persona as much as one who is to "feed the sheep," I find it sad that his legacy will involve so many contradictions in this area. Here I believe he missed a golden opportunity to truly lead the church into the 21st century in ways that might have sparked the deep desires of thinking people rather than the restorationistic hopes of those longing for a return of the triumphal church. In terms of systematic theology, I celebrate his Wednesday series of talks that showed heaven and hell are not places but states, yet wonder, given the myth of Adam and Eve, why he failed to probe new approaches around redemption and salvation.

Regarding church history, I was happy when he apologized for the sins of the past perpetrated by "certain sons of the church" (from the Crusades to Galileo); but I am disappointed that he never acknowledged that these "sins of the sons" were generally perpetrated by the hierarchy. Here, as well as regarding what has been called the greatest

crisis in the modern Catholic Church--the pedophilia scandals by priests and the even greater cover-ups by so many bishops--he wouldn't or couldn't admit that they occurred because of the power abuse of the celibate, controlling, clerical caste. The final evidence of this for many was when Cardinal Law was sent from a retreat house to oversee St. Mary Major Basilica.

While he insisted on objective "truth" and believed deeply that it would set people free, his approach to "the truth" often created deep divisions when it came to issues regarding gender, sexual orientation and issues of life itself. With his death, I find it sadly revealing that few female Catholic theologians or women religious from the mainline congregations have praised his legacy. With many of them, I feel his theology of women's "complementarity" with men to be contradictory. It ultimately flowed from a patriarchal bias in a way that has left many women feeling structurally and spiritually alienated and excluded from the church to which many have given their lives.

People like to recall one of Pope John Paul II's favorite scriptural quotes: "Be not afraid." They admire him for speaking fearlessly about what he believed; yet, at the same time, with little real dialogue on divisive issues, he oversaw an institutionalized climate of fear that threatened those working in the church who publicly professed different views. More specifically, I believe his obsession with preserving the male, celibate, clerical model of the church has contributed largely to a huge loss of nominal Catholics in Latin America to Protestant sects and to a credibility gap with millions of nominal Catholics in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand whose embrace of secularism makes "the church" increasingly irrelevant to their issues and concerns.

In conclusion, while proud of his courage on many issues regarding public policy, I believe this brilliant man failed to meet the critical challenge demanded by our times when it comes to church polity. He could have capitalize on his conservative credentials in a way that would have challenged close-minded Catholics to think differently. In this I think of how Richard Nixon in the United States was able to "open the door" to China; only a bona-fide conservative could have accomplished this. Unfortunately, John Paul II did not use his conservative credentials to move the church itself into the 21st century. Whether a new Pope will have his charismatic personality to do so will be up to the Holy Spirit.