

Pope St. John Paul II: Witness to the world

CNS file photo

This is the 10th in a [series looking at the Church's 12 most recent popes](#) and the marks they've made on the Church. The series is appeared monthly throughout 2018.

Sometimes it seemed as if Pope St. John Paul II could do just about anything – do it well, in fact – if he simply set his mind to doing it. This impression of uncommon giftedness would by itself have been enough to give his pontificate its special aura.

You could sum him up something like this: charismatic contemplative, prophetic voice of orthodoxy, sophisticated intellectual with profound devotion to the Virgin Mary, poet and athlete, foe of communism and of Western “super development,” philosopher and activist with an actor’s flair. And finally, in those last, painful years of illness and decline, a figure in whom many saw a living icon of the suffering Christ.

Coming to the papacy after a long night of confusion and anxiety in the Church, Pope John Paul II set out to make things right. “Be not afraid,” he reassured the crowd in St. Peter’s Square right after his election. As vicar of Christ and servant of the servants of God, he took his own advice, pursuing policies reflecting uncommon faith and self-confidence for nearly 27 years.

He had his critics. Some groused about his teaching on sexual morality, others about his insistence that the Church can’t ordain women, or his continued requirement of celibacy for priests of the Western Church, or his centralized leadership. Sometimes he was blamed for intervening too much in local

bishops' affairs, other times – as in the sexual abuse scandal – for not intervening enough.

In the end, though, the critics could take nothing away from either the remarkable force of his personality or his extraordinary achievements. Eamon Duffy calls his pontificate – third longest in history, exceeded only by Blessed Pius IX and, according to tradition, St. Peter – one of the “most momentous” ever for its impact on the Church and the world.

From the underground

Karol Jozef Wojtyła was born in Wadowice, an industrial town near Krakow, on May 18, 1920, second son of Karol Wojtyła, a Polish army officer, and Emilia Kaczorowska Wojtyła. His mother died in 1929; his older brother, Edmund, a physician, in 1932; and his father in 1941.

Before World War II he studied philosophy at the Jagiellonian University. When the Nazi occupiers of Poland, seeking to stamp out Polish intellectual life, closed down the university, he worked in a quarry and a chemical plant while acting with an underground theater.

In October 1942, he enrolled in the clandestine seminary conducted by Cardinal Adam Sapieha of Krakow. Ordained Nov. 1, 1946, he went to Rome to study at the Angelicum – the Dominicans' Pontifical Athenaeum of St. Thomas.

Returning to Krakow, he did pastoral work, served as a student chaplain and continued his studies, receiving doctorates from the Jagiellonian in philosophy and theology. He then taught moral theology and ethics at the Catholic University of Lublin. He also carried on an active apostolate among young lay intellectuals and professionals. On July 4, 1958, during a kayaking trip with young friends, he got word that Pope Pius XII had named him auxiliary bishop of Krakow.

He attended all four sessions of the Second Vatican Council,

speaking several times and helping write the council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Declaration on Religious Freedom and Decree on the Means of Social Communication.

In 1960 he published "Love and Responsibility," a book presenting Church teaching on sexuality and marriage that is said to have influenced Pope St. Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. (Human sexuality was a subject to which Wojtyła would return years later as pope in laying out a distinctive new "theology of the body" in a series of audience talks.)

On Jan. 13, 1964, Paul VI appointed him archbishop of Krakow. In the years that followed, he took part regularly in assemblies of the Synod of Bishops, convened an archdiocesan synod in Krakow, traveled widely in Europe and North America and even visited Australia, the Philippines and New Guinea. Pope Paul named him a cardinal on June 26, 1967. His book "The Acting Person," a densely written philosophical study, was published in 1969. In Lent of 1976 he preached the annual retreat attended by Pope Paul and the Roman curia. The meditations were published in a book titled "A Sign of Contradiction."

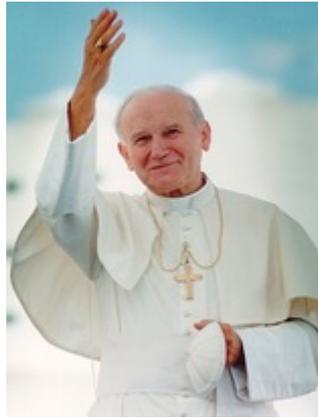
Pope for Poland, world

On Oct. 16, 1978, at the conclave following the sudden death of Pope John Paul I, he was elected 263rd successor of St. Peter, making him the first non-Italian to hold the office since 1522, the first Pole ever and the youngest pope since Pius IX. The long pontificate that followed had numerous highlights.

One of these was his role in the collapse of Soviet communism and the dissolution of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe – events in which his name is often linked to the names of President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

In June 1979, his first visit to Poland since his election sparked a huge upsurge of Polish patriotic and religious sentiment, with 13 million people turning out to see him, hear him and pray with him.

POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II AT A GLANCE



CNS photo via Joe Rimkus Jr.

- Born Karol Jozef Wojtyła on May 18, 1920
- Ordained a priest in 1946, an auxiliary bishop in 1958, an archbishop in 1964 and made a cardinal in 1967
- Third-longest reigning pope from Oct. 16, 1978-April 2, 2005, first Pole ever and first non-Italian pope since 1522
 - Canonized 482 saints and beatified 1,338 others
- Helped bring down communism and reconcile Catholics with Jews and Orthodox
- Beatified May 1, 2011, and canonized April 27, 2014, only nine years after his death

Years later he attributed the fall of Soviet communism largely to the reaction against “the spiritual void brought about by atheism.” Perhaps he was recalling the day in 1979 when the congregation at a Mass he celebrated in Warsaw’s Victory Square began shouting, “We want God.” He also gave significant moral and material support to the Solidarity labor movement in its struggle with the Polish communist regime.

Poland was hardly the only place visited by this most-traveled of popes, who covered a million miles in 104 trips outside Italy in his personal program of global evangelization. Five

times he came to the United States – twice to address the United Nations – and crisscrossing the nation. Fidelity to the moral principles embodied in their founding documents was the heart of his message to Americans. For, as he insisted in Baltimore in 1995, “democracy cannot be sustained without a shared commitment to certain moral truths about the human person and human community.”

‘Santo subito!’

John Paul was an ecumenical and interreligious innovator who, in Duffy’s words, “did more than any single individual in the whole history of Christianity to reconcile Jews and Christians.” Catholic-Orthodox reunion also was a special cause for him. His 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* took the unusual step of inviting other Christians’ thinking on the role of the papacy.

His many writings as pope reflect his personalist philosophy and his roots in Vatican II. Along with important documents on the laity and the dignity of women, four of his encyclicals are considered particularly noteworthy: the social encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (1991), *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) on fundamental moral principles, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) on life issues, and *Fides et Ratio* in 1998 on the link between philosophy and faith.

Insisting that both things – philosophy and faith – are needed as antidotes to contemporary postmodern relativism and skepticism, he wrote: “To believe it possible to know a universally valid truth is in no way to encourage intolerance; on the contrary, it is the essential condition for sincere and authentic dialogue between persons.” Catholic author Robert Royal calls his message “vital for a world that has lost its faith in reason.”

John Paul canonized 482 saints – more than all his predecessors combined – and beatified 1,338 others. The saints

include Maximilian Kolbe, Edith Stein, Mary Faustina Kowalska, Katherine Drexel, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, and Josemaria Escriva. John Paul also promulgated the revised Code of Canon Law, a project originating in the pontificate of John XXIII, and commissioned and approved the new Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Church's first general catechism in 400 years.

In May of 1981, Pope John Paul was shot in St. Peter's Square by a Turkish gunman named Mehmet Ali Agca, apparently acting on behalf of Bulgarian intelligence in a plot orchestrated by Soviet intelligence. After a long and difficult recovery, he resumed his strenuous schedule, but starting in the early 1990s he suffered visibly from Parkinson's.

After his death on Saturday, April 2, 2005, the crowd in the square began shouting, "*Santo subito!*" – canonize him now. Nine years later, on April 27, 2014, Pope Francis formally declared him a saint.