

The Peripatetic Pope

WITNESS TO HOPE:

The Biography of Pope John Paul II.

By George Weigel.

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by James Morris

Cardinal Karol Wojtyła of Kraków was a man of great physical vigor—a skier, hiker, kayaker—when he was elected pope in 1978 at age 58 (and took the name John Paul II to honor his several immediate predecessors). In his years leading the world’s billion Roman Catholics, he has declined into age and infirmity, the natural process hastened by a would-be assassin’s bullets in 1981, by the subsequent near-fatal complications of infection, by falls and weakened joints and operations, by the onset of Parkinson’s disease, and perhaps by the harsh criticism he has endured from Catholics and non-Catholics alike. But age has not dulled his wit. In 1994, George Weigel tells us, after the pope moved slowly and painfully to his presiding place before an assembly of bishops, his first words were Galileo’s defiant insistence on the Earth’s orbit around the sun: “Eppur si muove”—“And yet, it moves.”



The incident is a throwaway event in this massive biography, and yet it is an emblematic moment for the perpetually mobile John Paul, next to whom Marco Polo was a shut-in and Magellan a day tripper. No human being has ever spoken to so many people in so many different cultural contexts—hundreds of millions of men, women, and children in person and through the media. The numbers for some of those occasions defy comprehension: International World Youth Day in Manila in 1995 drew between five and seven million people, which Weigel calls “the largest human gathering in history.”

Popes were not always so public and peripatetic. As recently as the middle of the 20th century, Pius XII, who was pope from 1939 to 1958, defined a different standard. In photos and newsreels he looked dour, stern, and remote, the prince of a shadowed Vatican. His successor, John XXIII, broke the mold of

that papacy. John’s reign (1958–1963) and the term of John F. Kennedy partially overlapped. Though decades apart in age, the two were twin media darlings—a bouncing president after one who had seemed all bore, a cuddly pope after one who had seemed all bone.

The Kennedy legacy dissipated like smoke. Not so John’s

impact. The Second Vatican Council, which he summoned in 1962, initiated a process of openness and adjustment—and dissension—in the Catholic Church that persists to this day. John Paul II believes that Vatican II, which he attended when he was Bishop Karol Wojtyła, was a transforming event in the life of the church, and that the teachings of the council, correctly understood, will situate the church for the new millennium. Correct understanding, alas, has been tinder for reformers and traditionalists alike. The intellectual, philosophical, and theological fires continue to burn, in the brush if not in the forest. To some Catholics, this pope is the council's champion; to others, its Judas.

The conventional criticism of John Paul II, especially within the Catholic Church, is that he is an authoritarian who has slowed reform and, by identifying the Church with the papacy, muted Vatican II's call for greater collegial responsibility. From other quarters there are complaints that he has failed to restore the theological, organizational, and pastoral discipline in the church that eroded after Vatican II; that he has governed as an outsider in the Roman Curia; and that he will leave behind an administrative apparatus insufficiently attuned to the teachings of his pontificate and to its interpretation of Vatican II.

And, oh yes, that he is a misogynist (to those who know him, a confounding charge), whose views on sex are hopelessly retrograde. When many of the world's Catholics, American Catholics in particular, ignore the church's teaching on birth control, or observe it grudgingly, why has this pope not recognized popular sentiment and changed the rules? Because he is neither pollster nor politician. Rather than alter the church's position, John Paul II sought to redefine its grounds through a new theology of the body, rooted in a conviction that sexual activity reflects the divine activity of human creation. Dissenters were unimpressed. The theologians can have their

say on the arcane niceties of Trinitarian procession, but on sexual matters experience trumps ingenuity.

Weigel, a Senior Fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., counters the criticism of John Paul II with what he regards as the man's great achievements: a renovated papacy, the full implementation of Vatican II, the collapse of communism, a concern for the moral well-being of the free society, a passion for ecumenism and for reaching out to other faiths, and the personal example of a life so nobly lived as to have changed innumerable other lives. While this most visible and active of popes has provoked the most disparate assessments, Weigel stakes out no middle ground. The Catholic Church can name no living person a saint, so John Paul II is not yet up for canonization, but Weigel's formidable book is an implicit argument that his turn should one day come.

Access can be a blessing and a bane to a biographer, and Weigel had access. The pope asked him to write the biography and cooperated to ease his task. But there was no attempt, we are told, to dictate the contents. This is not an authorized biography; its reverence derives from the painstakingly assembled and considered evidence. Let those who would take a different view of John Paul II be as persuasive in minimizing his achievement or in ascribing other motives to his actions as Weigel is in his enthusiast's account.

Weigel's John Paul II is a philosopher, an intellectual, and a mystic, a man drawn to the cloistered life of the Carmelites who finds himself instead, in this age of the ubiquitous camera and the radiant pixel, a celebrity. He governs a church that he means to be not authoritarian but authoritative, and neither liberal nor conservative but evangelically confident about eternal truths. "He can only be grasped and judged," writes Weigel, "if one approaches him and accepts him for

what he says he is: a man of faith, whose faith is who he is.”

In the first third of the book—its most absorbing pages—Weigel takes John Paul through a series of profoundly shaping experiences: education and friendship (the pope remains close to old friends from his student days); the horrors of war and Nazi occupation and the bravery of clandestine resistance (Wojtyla was part of an underground theater movement that used drama, the word, to save the Polish cultural tradition from Nazi eradication); the insidious, dispiriting decades of communist domination; a bishopric at age 38; a cardinal’s hat at 47; the papacy at 58. The biographer describes a man at ease with the physical world, with scientific inquiry, with human relations, with culture and the imagination—when young, this pope wrote plays and poems and journalism and even considered becoming an actor.

The actions of John Paul II flow from beliefs he held many years before his papacy: the world has been forever sanctified by the person of Jesus Christ, whose life was the defining event of human history; men must be allowed to seek the truth and to live lives of dignity and freedom; religious freedom is the fundamental freedom; culture, not politics or economics, is the driving force of history. This pope has no specifically political agenda. Yet he has done more than anyone else to force the end of communism, not by attacking it directly but by insisting that cultural and social conditions must respect fundamental human freedoms. Communism could not pass the test. When individuals in communist bloc countries began to live openly and defiantly in the freedom John Paul proposed, communism was made to see its true face, and, like Medusa in sight of herself, it expired. Subjecting capitalism to the same test, he declares that economic freedom must be “circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality and sees it as a par-

ticular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious.”

Weigel eventually provides a tally sheet on the externals of John Paul II’s papacy—pilgrimages, audiences, linear feet of encyclicals and other teachings—that is at once humbling and, because it uses the world’s criteria to measure what in its true worth is beyond calculation, a little jarring. Weigel notes that the pope has canonized 280 new saints. The astonishing figure reflects John Paul’s generous belief that sanctity is more common than we may think, and perhaps within reach.

The criticisms that can be made of Weigel’s book—it is too long; its narrative is sometimes clogged with repetitive incident (the accumulating papal journeys reduce Weigel to calling sections of the book “Asia, Again” and “Central America, Again”); it is too indulgent of its subject and too dismissive of his critics; its embrace of history and theology and politics, in the world and (much trickier) in the Catholic Church, is impossibly ambitious—are dwarfed by the scale of its achievement. Crammed with facts and events and evidence, it is a singular example of the virtues of old-fashioned, documented, sturdily chronological biography.

America may not be the best vantage from which to judge John Paul II, who presides over a universal church in which Americans enjoy no special privilege. We’re not Number One, and this pope will not pretend that we are, or court us with approbation. His courage rebukes anemic hope and halfhearted allegiance; his generosity of spirit shames our saturating materialism. There is no other figure of comparable moral stature in the world today, when heroism is a local phenomenon at best and too much belief barely has surface purchase. In a world of “whatever,” John Paul’s is the faith that confounds pliant men.

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