



A Legacy of Ideas: The Transformational Thought of Pope John Paul II

S*tan the Man* Musial is arguably the 2nd most popular Pole of the 20th century. His lifetime batting average was .331. He hit 475 home runs and was named his league's Most Valuable Player three times. The only Pole who was more popular was Karol Wojtyła, who became Pope John Paul II in 1978. His pontificate lasted 9,665 days. He traveled well over 775,000 miles while visiting 1,022 cities. He held 1,164 general audiences attended by 17,665,800 people. He wrote 14 encyclicals, canonized 482 new saints and created 231 new cardinals.

The Peoples' Saint

It is impossible to take the full measure of any man, let alone a pope, in numbers and statistics. However his pontificate of over 26 years warrants a deeper analysis. Of all the other popes in history, only Peter and Pius IX served longer than John Paul. His long reign was destined to change the course of the Catholic Church. His charismatic Christian discipleship made the message of Christ more compelling to a world that thought it had outgrown a *need* for any religious faith. John Paul's global travels and openness to people of all faiths, transformed the papacy as radically as Franklin D. Roosevelt transformed the American presidency.

Pope John Paul II was also a man of extraordinary courage—the kind of courage that comes from a faith forged in reflection on Calvary and the Resurrection of the Son of God. His was the kind of courage that inspired courage in others. He truly believed that *in the designs of Providence, there are no mere coincidences*. What seems to most people to be merely accidental was in fact an aspect of Providence that people had not understood yet.

According to his main biographer George Weigel, he was a man of such heroic virtue that the people had *already beatified and canonized him in their hearts*. He was truly a *papal saint of the people*. John Paul's vision of himself was not as a politician or diplomat but as a teacher. His writings reflected his keen intellect from his poetic and theatrical musings to his scholarly tomes.

John Paul II took great responsibility in his role as the protector of the Church's *deposit of faith* while at the same time applying it to the quotidian needs of the Catholics in the pews. He came to the papacy with firm convictions about how the Second Vatican Council should be interpreted. He saw a deep need for stability and calm after the tumultuous days that followed the Council.

A Pope of Surprises

John Paul was definitely a pope of many surprises. The selection of Karol Wojtyła as the first pope in 455 years from outside of Italy and the first Slavic pope ever were the first great surprises. He had also lived most of his adult life under totalitarian systems and therefore had a thorough understanding of the moral dynamics of human relationships with regard to moral judgments. His constant proclamations about the universality of human rights from the papal throne were in themselves revolutionary for the times.

The pope also surprised many by holding the world's attention for decades, in a media age where global celebrity lasts not much longer than the usual *Warholian* 15 minutes. In the Great Jubilee of 2000, he made the world and the Church confront the fact that *Christianity is based on the witness of transformed lives, real lives, lived at a certain moment in history and at defined places that can be touched*.

John Paul was often mislabeled as a conservative. In truth he cut across the political spectrum in his lifelong pursuit of the truth. He was orthodox in his teachings on abortion, euthanasia and contraception but his sense of *personalism* that is the importance of the human person, was very appealing to liberals. While he opposed the ordination of women, he opened other church positions to women, from altar servers to diocesan chancellors.

John Paul will always be remembered for his ecumenical outreach toward Jews and his controversial outreach to Muslims. His last surprise was the way in which his last few years personified the central mystery of Christian faith on suffering and death for people around the world.

A Dark Night

As a Pole, suffering had always been a mark of Karol Wojtyła. As pope he suffered more than most people knew or understood. The residual affects of his near-assassination in 1981, a skiing accident, broken bones and the ravages of his advancing age took a noticeable toll on his once robust body the last years of his papacy. As a result many people, not just Catholics, grew to love and respect him on a deeper level.

The *Polish Pope* could always rely on the promises of faith to help him endure his suffering. He once described his experience of World War II as *humiliation at the hands of evil*. As a Pole he suffered with his people. For over 200 years, many European countries had suppressed and tortured the Polish people with millions of casualties. The pope, like his fellow countrymen, saw all this in Messianic terms. There was an irrepressible joy in their collective solidarity that transcended their quotidian sufferings. His Polish background of suffering helped to forge his unique vision of the human person. He was dedicated to an intellectual and pastoral defense of the dignity of the human person.

Some of his personal suffering went much deeper than his ravished body. The *Evil One* never let him alone. He tormented John Paul with a *dark night of the soul*. This is a period of spiritual dryness, which is sometimes called a *desert experience*, similar to what many great saints experienced and which afflicted Mother Teresa for most of her adult life in 2003.

Because of his familiarity with St. John of the Cross, the author of *The Dark Night of the Soul*, John Paul knew how to turn his suffering into a redemptive act. After all, the motto of his priesthood had always been *be not afraid*, and it served him well during the final years of his life.

The Polish Pope

Often referred to as *the Polish Pope*, Pope John Paul was not afraid to confront the communist government in Poland. Polish history had taught them how to suffer for 200 years. They had been religiously oppressed, enslaved, until finally abandoned to the Soviets by the United States at Yalta. But they had the strength of their Catholic faith. Over 80 % of the Polish population was Catholic, and the church had long been the one significant focal point of resistance to the communist regime.

The Church was at the center of freedom in all of Poland. It was the only place one could freely assemble, discuss political issues and even see a movie. *Going to Mass*, Time Magazine noted, *became not only a religious act but a quiet sign of rebellion*.

John Paul II's opposition to Polish communism made him the focal point in the collapse of European Communism. He was

the irresistible force that turned the tide against the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe. The pope changed the course of history and helped bring an end to the Cold War through his support of *Solidarity* and the Polish freedom movement. This started the landslide that wiped out communism in Eastern Europe and eventually the Soviet Union. Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev said the final downfall of communism in 1991 *could not be understood without referring to the example set by the Polish Pope*.

George Weigel's recent book, the 2th volume of his biography of John Paul, *The End of the Beginning* focuses on the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. With special access to new information from the Polish secret police, the German Stasi the KGB and other previously classified communist-era documents, Weigel reconstructed the sheer magnitude of the communist effort to suborn, blackmail, and ultimately destroy their main ideological enemy, the Catholic Church and especially its pope.

The Pope and the Jews

The Jewish people also knew a lot about suffering. John Paul had a special feeling for the Jews that dated back to his Polish youth. His compassion for them began with his friendship with many Jews during the Nazi occupation of Poland. He saw them brutally carted off to the Nazi death camps.

His outreach to the Jews and to Judaism was a spiritual journey for the pope. He always dreamed of their eventual reunion with Catholicism. To John Paul, a Jew who had converted to the Church had transcended Judaism—an idea many Jews find repulsive. On his first trip to Poland in 1979, the pope visited Auschwitz. He met a nun who stopped and said, *I want you to know that I am a Russian Jew who converted*. And the pope was immensely moved. Tears ran down his face and he embraced her.

Without lapsing into religious indifferentism, the pope expressed no signs of *Catholic Triumphalism* with other faiths. The Jews were, however, unhappy with the pope when he canonized Jewish convert Edith Stein, who had become Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, a Carmelite nun. The Jews argued that she died in Auschwitz in 1942 because she was a Jew while the pope believed her suffering and Catholic devotion had transcended her ethnic origins. This made her very special to John Paul.

A Theological Time Bomb

Another irony of John Paul's pontificate is the fact that his most lasting contribution to the Church might be in spiritual and moral education. With a Ph.D. in Philosophy, he was one of the best-educated popes of modern times. He devoted the first major teaching project of his pontificate to a subject that promises to change many long standing attitudes toward the human body. In a series of 129 short talks, known as the *Theology of the Body* (TOB) that

took place between September of 1979 and November of 1984, the pope provided a profoundly beautiful vision of human embodiment and spousal love.

George Weigel described the pope's exegesis on human sexuality as *one of the boldest reconfigurations of Catholic theology in centuries*. It was to him a *theological time bomb set to go off with dramatic consequences...* The pope's message is so profound that it will *compel a dramatic development of thinking about virtually every major theme in the Creed*. The TOB, which later became the pope's book, *Man, Woman, He Created Them*, begins with the Incarnation of God's human body. In today's sexually-charged climate, with its neo-Manichean culture, the importance of the human body is not *overvalued*, according to the pope but *undervalued*.

Like the Manicheans of old, modern culture has declared a war between the body and its spirit. The secular world has made human sexuality an area for manipulation and exploitation, rather than the center of primordial wonder. Instead of discovering the divine image in the human body, the culture only sees its likeness to the animal kingdom. And since the human body manifests itself prominently through its sexuality, the human family is grievously wounded and collapses under the cultural weight. Though somewhat abstract, the TOB elevates the dignity of the human person at a time when the West has wandered down the path to *Huxley's brave new world of manufactured and stunted humanity*.

The TOB reveals the intimate connection between the human body and Jesus' Incarnation. By taking a human body, Jesus linked mankind with the mystery of the Triune God. John Paul's biblical concept of the *nuptial meaning of the body* with its analogous relationship of total self-giving of the Persons in the Trinity is perfectly suited to Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. The body does not merely *house* the soul but is an integral unity that permeates the whole. Both are destined for an eternal union with God. This underscores the human body as the *Temple of the Holy Spirit*.

A Tough Act

Pope Benedict XVI is the 264th successor to the *Rock of Peter*. In the theatrical parlance of his predecessor, John Paul II was a *tough act to follow*. While Pope Benedict will undoubtedly have his own legacy, the legacy of John Paul seems boundless, as it traversed a wide plethora of cultural,

moral, historical, economic and scientific issues.

In essence John Paul's legacy was a *legacy of ideas*. He rescued the Western humanistic tradition from its 19th century fall into skepticism and nihilism. He presented Christian doctrine through the prism of this humanism. The key to understanding his thinking, according to the late Avery Cardinal Dulles, is his steady focus on *the mystery of the human person*. The world strove to live freely but had not learned to live in freedom because they had lost touch with the dignity of the human person.

By helping people understand the profound internal harmony between human sexuality and the Christian mystery, John Paul's *Theology of the Body* paved the way for a lasting renewal of marriage and the family.

Unlike some of his predecessors, John Paul's more than 26-year reign was never tainted by personal immorality or corruption. Despite intense pressure from liberal Catholics in the United States to give in to secular societal norms, John Paul stood firm in his opposition to evils such as abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, contraception, and same-sex marriage.

During the Wojtyla papacy, the Vatican reasserted its authority over reform-minded bishops and dissenting theologians. It repudiated demands for the ordination of women and married men. John Paul's social doctrine described the free and virtuous society *as one free of market-centered economy, a democratic polity and a robust public moral culture*. He spoke of a special relationship between the Jews and the Church and insisted that the Old Covenant had never been revoked.

He also explored the intimate connection between faith and reason and mollified Church critics through a judgment on the infamous Galileo case. John Paul was a papacy that directed the Church as a *civilization of love* inspiring others, particularly young people, to lives of joy and hope. Arguably no pope has had such a universal impact on the Catholic Church, than *John Paul the Great* or now *Blessed John Paul*.

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The Mindszenty Report is published monthly by the
Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation,
7800 Bonhomme Ave.
P.O. Box 11321
St. Louis, MO 63105
Phone 314-727-6279 Fax 314-727-5897
Subscription rate: \$20.00/year, \$36.00/two years.
Outside the U.S.A. \$28.00

The Mindszenty Report is not copyrighted, and
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their local newspapers.

Contributions to the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation
are tax deductible as allowed by law.

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Tribute to Our Council Member



Fr. Charles Repole O.F.M. Cap (1915 - 2011), an ardent CMF Council Member, was a devoted missionary for 20 years to the Miskito Indians in Nicaragua sharing with them many hardships and deprivations of their Indian population.

He laboriously and brilliantly prepared a trilingual dictionary in English, Spanish, and Miskito for their advancement. But, within five years the Communists had taken over Nicaragua, exiled Fr. Repole and destroyed all religious chapels.

The Capuchin Franciscan Friars of the Province of St. Mary mourn the death of their brother Father Charles Repole, who passed away on Tuesday, October 18, 2011 at Queen of Peace Residence in Queens Village, New York at the age of 96.

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Christmas Blessings

Dear CMF Friend,

Christmas 2011

Due to the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation's profound influence on my teenage years, and due to one year of priesthood under the Iron Curtain in Communist Hungary, I have a special place in my heart for the peoples enslaved by the cruel Soviet system.



Last summer I visited Hungary, my "second home." I prayed at the tomb of the now Blessed Vilmos Apor, Bishop of Győr, who was murdered by the Soviets while defending the women of his city. **A Hero.**

In Budapest I stayed in a building on whose wall hangs a plaque to remember the brave young revolutionaries in 1956 who gave their lives for liberty on that very spot. **Heroes.**

Dear Friends, we stand under the patronage of a great **Hero**, Cardinal József Mindszenty, who endured nine years of solitary Communist imprisonment and 21 years of confinement, a valiant stand against oppression to inspire generations.

You are all Heroes. Many nations are now free because of YOUR prayers and YOUR efforts over the years. Let us not forget that there are others who still must live under oppression, whose blood and tears call out to YOU to continue the heroism begun by these legendary figures.

**That is why I support the
Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation and
why I now ask for your support!
Please send a Christmas Gift to CMF today!**

During the Christmas season, our Council Members will offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass for your intentions. May the Christ Child shower His blessings on you and your families.

With blessings and gratitude,

Kevin E. Rettig

Reverend Kevin E. Rettig, Pastor
St. Joseph the Worker
CMF Council Member