

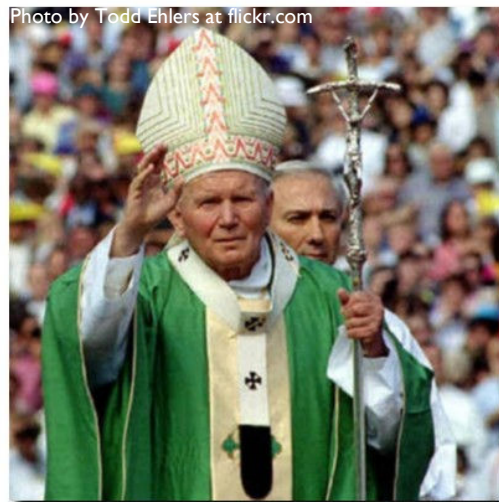
Pope John Paul II: Thinking outside the Church

Tony McCaffry

This Sunday 1 May, Pope John Paul II will be beatified in Rome. Tony McCaffry traces the life story of the pope who travelled more than any other, and engaged on many levels with civil society and other faith groups. How were Karol Wojtyła's early years instrumental in shaping the thinking of a pope who 'saw the importance of being present to the world' and prayed side by side with the world's faith leaders?

There is a framed photograph in our home: a smiling man in white is speaking (without notes) at a microphone, a security officer at his side, while the section of the crowd pictured give him wrapt and smiling attention. This was Pope John Paul II, playing the crowds, room by room, at a reception in Archbishop's House, Westminster, in May 1982. One of the biggest smiles in the crowd is on the face of the attractive lady in the maternity smock: my lovely wife, Nina, carrying our fifth child. Moments after this photograph was taken, by the official photographer, the Pope was ushered on to the next room, to charm everyone there with his smile and unaffected manner: even the jokes changed according to the room! Before he left, however, he reached out with his right hand and placed it in blessing on Nina's head. There were no words spoken – none were needed. It is, for us, a lovely, warming memory of a special encounter.

The beatification of Pope John Paul II, due to be celebrated in Rome – and around the world – on 1 May 2011, will mark the Church's affirmation of the faith and life of a worthy servant of God. Blessed John Paul will be promoted as an exemplar of how to live the life of faith, with honesty, integrity and whole-hearted commitment. All aspects of his life and work will now become, even more than in his lifetime,



matters of interest and analysis: what did this holy person consider important in his life?

There is an oddity in the convention adopted by the Roman Catholic Church in the naming of its papal saints: the adopted papal name is preferred to the baptismal name. Yet it is the life of the person, rather than that of the functionary, which accounts for the eminent sanctity. In this particular case, there is much to reflect upon.

Karol Josef Wojtyła lived almost to the end of his 85th year. He was elected pope in 1978 (the year of three popes), aged 58, Polish not Italian. When he died, on 2 April 2005, he was the third longest-serving pope of the 264 (after St Peter and Blessed Pius IX). One of the distinguishing characteristics of his papacy was the improved relationships with religions other than his own. How did this come about? What made this Servant of God discern that God's will for him lay in this direction? How do any of us know what God wants of us? I suggest it is by the circumstances of our lives and the seemingly random interventions which affect them – reflected upon in the light of our own and others' experience in order to find meaning.

The young Karol's life contained much to give him cause to question. His mother, Emilia, died when he was nine, the year of his First Communion. He never

knew his sister, Olga, who had died before he was born. Karol was twelve when his brother, Edmond, died. He was twenty-one when his father, also Karol, died. Where would he find family now?

Karol was confirmed in 1938, aged eighteen. That same year he enrolled at the University of Krakow – and also at the Drama School in the same city. The University was closed down in 1939, when Poland was overrun by German forces. To avoid conscription, Karol worked as a labourer in a quarry and later, in 1942, in a chemical factory. It was also in 1942 that he joined the clandestine diocesan seminary, while also staying active in the drama group, Rhapsodic Theatre. At the war's end, both university and seminary studies re-surfaced. Karol was ordained priest on All Saints' Day, 1946.

The young priest was sent to Rome for further studies in Theology, including scriptural studies with the eminent authority, Fr Garigou-Lagrange OP. His doctoral thesis was on faith in the works of the 16th century mystic and poet, St. John of the Cross. The summer holiday in 1947 was spent doing pastoral work with the Polish communities in France, Belgium and Holland. In 1948, he was appointed curate and university chaplain in Krakow.

In 1951, Karol did further studies in Philosophy and Theology, being groomed for the Chair of Ethics at Lublin Catholic University, while also teaching courses in moral theology and social ethics at the seminary. In 1958 he was ordained bishop, to serve as Auxiliary in the Archdiocese of Krakow.

The young bishop, bright of mind and a proven communicator, was well placed to benefit from and contribute to the conciliar process of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). He was particularly noticed for his valuable participation in the editing of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), prepared within the Council and finally approved in 1965. (The important Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, received its approval earlier in that same year.) The formative influence of the Council experience was considerable. Another young tyro present throughout the Council, first as a priest *peritus* (expert adviser), later in his own

right as bishop, was Derek Worlock: the friendship of the two men began with their closeness in the alphabetical listing – and seating – of the Council fathers. They also shared an enthusiasm for the renewed agenda of the institutional Church.

In 1964, the Auxiliary Bishop of Krakow became its archbishop: three years later he was named cardinal. At the Consistory in 1978, following the unexpected death of Pope John Paul I, Cardinal Wojtyła was elected pope, choosing to keep the name of his late predecessor.

What has life offered him thus far? A sensitivity to family relationships, honed by their absence. No fear of hard labour. An alertness to political reality. A relish for study. Commitment to serve God, Church and people through priestly ministry. A readiness to step out of his comfort zone in order to be an effective pastor. Relish for working with bright minds, especially of the young. An appreciation of the artistic as well as the cerebral in human relations. A zest for communication, helped by a facility with languages. A pastoral concern which extended beyond his own flock. (In 1969, as Archbishop of Krakow, he visited the Jewish community in their synagogue in the city – an historic first.)

The new pope, who had championed the outward-looking policy document on the Church in the Modern World, demonstrated his active appreciation of it. The statistics are impressive: he made 104 pastoral visits outside Italy (and 146 within). He was a people-person: 17.6 million people attended his General Audiences over the years; he hosted 19 World Youth Days and other World Meetings of Families. He was also a player on the world stage: 38 official visits abroad; 738 meetings with Heads of State; 246 meetings with Prime Ministers. Here was a pope who saw the importance of being present to the world and engaged with it – even when exercising such a public persona left him vulnerable to personal attack. The prophetic impact of good relations with the world's political leaders, even those responsible for past injustices which had impacted on his life, was seen to be applicable to the volatile and charged atmosphere of interreligious relations, where memories of actual or perceived injustices tend to be longer-lived and more acutely felt.

The pope had been taught by life to be conservative. He was the product of a Catholic upbringing in a Catholic country pressured by an atheistic power bloc. His viewpoint was that of the Church: the prevalent ethos within that culture was that the Roman Catholic Church was the one true Church, leaving other Christian traditions as lesser, other religions as aberrations. How did the man from such a background come to side-by-side prayer with the Archbishop of Canterbury in Canterbury Cathedral in May 1982, or prayer for peace with leaders of the world's faith traditions at Assisi in October 1986?

In his long service as pope, John Paul II issued 14 encyclicals, 15 apostolic exhortations, 11 apostolic constitutions, 45 apostolic letters, approved the revision of Canon Law (for the Church of both East and West) and the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. This formidable array of documents witnesses to the pattern of his principled, but evolving, understanding of the Church, its mission and its ministry. The foundation of the principles predates the considerable papal output: the Cardinal Archbishop of Krakow emphasised this in his *Foundations of Renewal: A Study on the Implementation of the Second Vatican Council* (1972).

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), approved by the Council on 21 November 1964, had proved problematic for some of the Council Fathers, in that it clarified what the Church *is*, but left less clearly stated what the Church *is for*. Its claim for the Catholic Church to be the body in which the authentic Church 'subsists' (para.8) seemed more humanly exclusive than divinely inclusive. *Gaudium et Spes* was generated, in part, to redress the balance. Its opening paragraph is both moving and challenging – and carries much of the conviction of the pope who felt it important to kiss the ground of the lands he visited:

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of people united in Christ and guided by the holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father's kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity. That is why they cherish a feeling of

deep solidarity with the human race and its history. (*Gaudium et Spes*, §1)

This was a move away from a 'churchified' Church, preoccupied with its own internal workings and personal salvation. There is a big wide world out there – and it matters!

The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*), approved on 7 December 1965, stressed the need for ministers to be alert to the cultural realities of the people they were serving. 'In philosophy and theology they should examine the relationship between the traditions and religion of their homeland and Christianity' (§16). It is also noted, in the same paragraph, that 'friendly dialogue' with those who were not Christians should be seen as expressing the necessary spirit of ecumenism.

The Declaration on Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*), also approved on 7 December 1965, was unequivocal on church policy: 'The Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom' (§2). This, then, is the context in which to understand the brief but crucial Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*), approved by the Council on 28 October 1965. It affirms the intrinsic merit of traditions other than its own. 'The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions' (§2), and encourages discussion and collaboration with members of other faiths. (It is significant to note that Pope John Paul would later mark an end to defining other religions by what they were not, 'Non-Christians'. The Secretariat for Non-Christians would be replaced by The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, signalling an intended change in mindset as well as label. A sincere effort is called for in mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims (§3) as also in appreciating the common spiritual heritage with the Jews (§4). The final paragraph of the Declaration is unambiguous:

The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against people or any harassment of them on the basis of their race, colour, condition in life or religion. (*Nostra Aetate* §5)

Pope John Paul II had been instrumental in articulating the Church's teaching for the world of the

day. He took the message seriously and worked at implementing it, in word and action. His many travels expressed his concern that the whole of humanity (and all of creation) was a unique manifestation of God's gracious gift, redeemed by Christ – whether there was awareness of this or not! This was a lifelong task, a work in progress, even into his frailty – even, perhaps, into the eloquent plain box of his coffin. He was learning, as must we all, to recognise what really matters and what does not matter so much. Living with difference is always a challenge for humans: it is to Pope John Paul's enormous credit that he made this very difference integral to the 'good news' of his own tradition.

Thursday 27 October 2011 will mark the silver jubilee of that invited gathering of religious leaders at Assisi, to mark the World Day of Prayer for Peace. Pope

Benedict XVI, at the midday *Angelus* on the first day of this calendar year, called for this anniversary to be marked by a similar gathering. Our world needs peace and mutual understanding more than ever. Prayer across our divides – together – is one way in which we can strive for this. We can look to Blessed John Paul, Karol Wojtyła, to encourage us forward with a smile – and to bless again the new life taking shape within us.

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Quotations taken from the revised translation in inclusive language of Austin Flannery (Ed.): 'The Basic Sixteen Documents of Vatican Council II' Costello Publishing Company, Northport, N.Y. 1996