

# Reflections on Pope John Paul II

By Fr. Dave Heney

Pope John Paul II was a man completely without fear.

He was a powerful presence in the church and the world for over 27 years. Few in all of history have had such impact. How did this happen? Who was He? I want to offer just a few brief reflections quickly written this Sunday about this remarkable person.

People often either liked or did not like the Pope depending on whether they felt he supported or opposed their own personal agendas and needs. People on both sides of important concerns such as pro-life issues, liturgical issues such as women priests, church issues such as style of authority, or economic issues such as helping the poor either praised or criticized him over the years depending if he agreed with them or not. I suppose that is normal. There is something else to see as well.

Pope John Paul settled on a different path rather early in his life that sharply focused his entire life in the service of what he strongly considered a deeper and broader issue: the freedom and dignity of the whole human person.

He knew from direct personal experience what happens when that freedom is denied and dignity is crushed. Historians estimate that modern atheistic regimes such as Fascism, Nazism and Communism were responsible for over 100 million deaths in the twentieth century. That is probably more than all the wars of history combined. He was a personal witness both in WWII and Communist Poland to the massive and tragic disaster that people suffer when they are enslaved to selfish ideologies, power, or violence.

He knew that the hearts of those who profess to follow Christ must change, and that they in turn must work to change the hearts of the world to Christ. The church itself had to propose a real and practical answer for today if the world was to have a future. He also knew from whom the answer must come and that we would need deep faith, clear intelligence, and profound courage to live it. For John Paul, the life of Christ was the answer to every question.

John Paul brought some powerful intellectual gifts to his work. He spoke over eleven languages and had a working knowledge of several more. In a world that was dominated by philosophical and secular ideologies, he earned two doctorates, one in Scholasticism, the philosophy of the Middle Ages, and the other in Existentialism, the philosophy of the Twentieth Century. He knew how to draw from both the past and the present to respond to the needs of the church.

Most important, he brought a personal courage that was unmatched. He began his papacy with two guiding ideas: "Be not afraid!" He lived that courage completely, whether facing a Soviet dictator or an assassin's bullet. He was a man completely without fear. His other guiding phrase was, "Totus Tuus" which means "all is yours." He never held back but made himself completely free to offer every moment in the service of God.

## WHAT WAS HIS MESSAGE?

The problems of the world haven't changed much since the fall of Adam and Eve, who were made in the very image of God. That image is one of freedom & dignity, love & responsibility, and rational & personal. His life was fearlessly dedicated to restoring, ensuring, and protecting all those for people everywhere. He believed that freedom and dignity and the other ideas are not just nice things for people to have but the very essence of what it means to be a human being in the world, no matter in what century, culture, or country. Here are just some of the key ideas emphasized during his years.

**Freedom & Dignity:** We must freely choose to accept God's invitation to live our full humanity. No one can choose for us because it is that free choice that makes us human and makes everything else possible, especially love. Love becomes the fullest expression of our humanity but can only exist in a conscience that is free. However, the Pope saw more than totalitarianism as a source of enslavement. He saw the rise of a kind of commercialism, where people are valued only if "useful," as a loss of real human dignity too. We are more than what we can do. He worked tirelessly on ensuring a "culture of life" from the moment of conception to natural death.

**Love & Responsibility:** This was actually the title of his first book. He believed we are responsible to seek and know the truth of things, and then respond in love. The Pope felt the most important moment in our life happens when we make a full and rational decision, and commit ourselves to action that is faithful to the truth and arises from a full and rational consideration of the consequence. Catholicism is not for spectators but for those who boldly live the faith they profess. The Pope also called the church to recognize its own sinful history, especially toward the Jews, or anytime it failed to live up to the call of Jesus to respect the freedom and dignity all people.

**Rational & Personal:** The Pope believed that honest and rational people can reach the truth that is available by faith. He appealed to people's intelligence with penetrating letters such as "The Splendor of Truth," and "Faith and Reason." He believed that rationality was important because "blind obedience gives no glory to God." He also believed in the power of each person to make a difference. He did so himself by *personally* delivering the message himself in travels to over 100 countries around the world. The Pope believed so much in the goodness and power of each person precisely because each person is made in the image of God. He brought his message of human dignity to the world in the usual ways of sermons, letters, and encyclicals, but he also elevated to sainthood those special persons who were examples themselves of the very message the Pope preached. By reason and the example of heroic persons he taught a message of the power of the human person who is free, responsible, and courageous.

I was privileged to meet the Pope several times and will never forget those moments. He began his papacy a few months after I was ordained in 1978. Since then, I have considered Pope John Paul II as a kind of personal mentor and powerful witness of what it means for anyone of us to be a real human being made in the image of God.

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