

Ecumenical Protestants laud pope's compassion: A persistent peacemaker

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Protestants joined political and religious leaders worldwide in praising John Paul II's compassionate papacy and leadership. If some Protestants voiced their disappointment that relatively little had changed in ecumenical affairs, doctrine or sexual policies, their remarks were contained within the universal admiration shown for the late pope.

Two Reformed leaders pointed to shared concerns with the pontiff, which included human dignity, peace, resistance to war (including the Iraq war), religious freedom and economic justice.

"While we may not have agreed on every social ethical stance, the papacy of Pope John Paul II has emphasized a clear stand on some major issues which are shared by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches," said the alliance president, Clifton Kirkpatrick, who is also the top executive of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and Setri Nyomi, the alliance's general secretary, in a joint statement.

In another tribute from Geneva, Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, said the pope's "role in the changes that would lift the iron curtain and open up Europe's borders remain a significant contribution to the region's and global history." Added Noko: "The conservative stance of John Paul II raised questions about this pope's dedication to the ecumenical movement."

But the limitations were already clear in 1984 when John Paul II visited Geneva, where the World Council of Churches has its headquarters. Referring to the papacy, a point of division with other denominations, the pope said, "fidelity to Christ forbids us to give it up."

Nevertheless, “a significant ecumenical breakthrough” was the signing in 1999 by the LWF and the Catholic Church of a “joint declaration on the doctrine of justification.” The two bodies reached agreement in basic truths pertaining to a doctrine that was a central area of contention between the papacy and Martin Luther at the time of the Reformation.

Commenting separately on that agreement, LWF President Mark S. Hanson of Chicago, who is also presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, said, “We live in new hope that the Spirit of the Living Christ will continue that work and bring about an even stronger relationship between the two church bodies.”

The American also lauded John Paul’s personal qualities. “A man of the people, he championed the cause of justice and peace not only for his native Poland but on behalf of all creation,” Hanson said. “He welcomed into his embrace people of every creed and race, but his love for young people was a special example of his care for all.”

Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, deferred a “proper tribute” for the days ahead, but expressed his “thankfulness” for the pope as “a leader of manifest holiness” and “prayerful friend of the Anglican Church.” Frank Griswold, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, said the pope’s “voice and moral authority gave inspiration and hope to millions well beyond the Roman Catholic Church.”

Speaking for the United Methodist Council of Bishops, ecumenical officer William B. Oden said John Paul embodied Rome’s “conflicts, its strengths and weaknesses and its struggles” and will be seen as “one of Catholicism’s greatest popes.” Still, Oden said, “he left a legacy of many unresolved issues, including women in the priesthood, celibacy and the call for greater lay involvement in decision-making.”

Another Methodist, Bob Edgar, said the National Council of Churches mourned the death of a “tireless servant of Christ.” Added Edgar, the NCC general secretary: “John Paul II’s persistence in pursuing peace, justice and unity—despite many illnesses, an assassination attempt and the growing difficulty of living with Parkinson’s disease—gave his ministry an urgent edge and a prophetic emphasis.”

Evangelist Billy Graham, whose own ministry and growing frailty has paralleled that of the pope, called John Paul “unquestionably the most influential voice for morality and peace in the world during the last 100 years.” A. Roy Medley, general secretary of the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., lauded the pope as a “strong

advocate for peacemaking and for understanding among cultures and religions.”