

# The pope's passions: The legacy of John Paul II

by [Charles E. Curran](#) in the [November 15, 2003](#) issue

The forceful, athletic and charismatic man who became pope in October 1978 is now an old man, unable to walk and debilitated by Parkinson's and other diseases. At his installation, the pope heard these words proclaimed three times: *Sic transit gloria mundi*—thus passes away the glory of the world. John Paul II has always recognized that he too will pass from this world, but in the meantime he has exercised an extraordinary influence on both the world and the church.

Karol Wojtyla made history by his very election: he was the first Slav pope in history and the first non-Italian since 1552. In the past 25 years, he has continued to make history. He brought to his office a forceful personality with many gifts. In his own words, he sees his life and ministry as one of evangelization—preaching and teaching the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is a life and ministry that has had significant ramifications in the political and economic arenas, for the relation of the world's religions, for the future of Christianity and, of course, for the internal life of the Roman Catholic Church.

From the start Wojtyla has insisted that the church and religion have a public role, that they cannot and should not be relegated to the private sphere. His three social encyclicals address not only Catholics but all people of good will, who are urged to work together for a more just society.

Samuel Huntington of Harvard has commented that in the 1950s no one would have guessed that the strongest force for democracy in the world in the last half of the 20th century would be the Roman Catholic Church. John Paul II has made human rights the cornerstone of his teaching. And he has championed not only political and civil rights such as freedom of religion, of speech, of the press and of association, but also social and economic rights such as the right to food, clothing, shelter, education and health care.

All observers recognize the influential role he played in the fall of communism, not only in his native Poland, but to a lesser degree throughout the countries of Eastern Europe. At the same time, he has opposed right-wing totalitarian regimes throughout the world for their violation of human rights.

John Paul II has been a strong and consistent voice for peace. He opposed the war in the Falkland Islands, the 1991 gulf war Desert Storm (“an adventure with no return”), and the recent U.S.-led attack on Iraq. He has spoken so often against war that he has had to defend himself against the charge of being a pacifist. He is not a pacifist, but he recognizes the terrible human consequences of war and that war itself can never bring about true peace.

The pope’s social teachings have been based on his understanding of the incomparable worth and dignity of the human person in creation and redemption. He has consistently stood up for the poor and the marginalized of the world. Every human being has a right to a minimally decent human existence. Wojtyla has been a sharp critic of liberation theology because of its reliance on Marxism, but he has accepted the need for a true and authentic liberation for all human beings, especially the poor and the marginalized, and he has taken up the liberationist emphasis on the preferential option for the poor. In keeping with his role of universal pastor, he speaks on a more general level and does not get into specifics. Nevertheless, he has called for forgiving the debts of poor countries.

John Paul II’s insistence on the dignity of the human person grounds his opposition to capital punishment. On this point he has definitely changed Catholic teaching. While he recognizes in theory the right of the state to take the life of criminals in extreme cases, he argues that today such cases are practically nonexistent. Even the criminal does not lose personal dignity and worth.

In the light of this personalism, Wojtyla insists on the integral development of the human person, recognizing that the spiritual is more important than the material aspects of human life. From this perspective, he criticizes those who see development and progress solely in economic terms. The economy must serve truly human needs. Materialism and consumerism, so prevalent in the modern world, fail to appreciate the human being’s spiritual aspects. The pope often repeats the refrain that being is much more important than having.

For John Paul II, the human person is not an isolated monad but exists in multiple relationships with others and is called to work in different types of communities, including the political community. *Solidarity* is John Paul II's word for this aspect of human life. Solidarity entails a determination to commit oneself to the common good. Solidarity opposes individualism in all its many forms. On a national scene, the political order or government is natural, necessary and good because it exists in order to help achieve the common good. On the other hand, the principle of subsidiarity calls for the government to help individuals and smaller groups and communities (families, neighborhoods, intermediary associations, etc.) to do all they can for the common good. Thus John Paul II, in keeping with the Catholic tradition, opposes both totalitarianism, which overemphasizes the totality at the expense of the individual person, and individualism, which so stresses the individual that it forgets about the common good.

In the economic realm, solidarity recognizes that the goods of creation exist to serve the needs of all. Private property is not an absolute. After the defeat of Marxism, John Paul II has insisted that capitalism is not the only model of economic organization. He accepts a fundamental role for business and the market but contends that freedom in the economic sphere must be circumscribed by a strong juridical framework that protects human values.

On the international scene, solidarity is the path to authentic human development and peace. While recognizing the limitations of the United Nations, the pope is quite supportive of its work.

On these issues, many liberal and mainstream Protestants have agreed with the pope, and have been very happy to see him take such stands, even if they do not share his philosophical framework.

Another side of papal teaching has appealed more to conservative Protestants. John Paul II has condemned genital homosexual relationships, direct abortion and euthanasia, and he has called on the civil law to ban these practices. He insists that Catholic politicians and citizens follow this teaching and practice.

For him, there is no contradiction between his various positions. For him, the primary reality is truth. Freedom is not an absolute, and must conform to truth. He opposes many aspects of modernity precisely because it has emphasized freedom at the expense of truth. On the basis of truth, the state must enforce human rights for all,

especially the poor and the marginalized, and it must also oppose abortion, euthanasia and homosexual unions. Some Catholic theologians point out that the pope too readily claims to have moral truth and translates his moral teaching into civil law without recognizing the role of freedom in a pluralistic society.

With regard to relations with other religions and non-Roman forms of Christianity, John Paul II's record is mixed. On the positive side, in October 1986 he invited leaders of the world's religions to Assisi to pray for peace. And wherever the pope goes on his many trips, he invariably meets with other religious leaders and the leaders of other Christian churches.

No pope has done more than John Paul II for Jewish-Catholic relations. He has apologized for Catholic anti-Semitism. His dramatic visits to the synagogue in Rome and the Western Wall in Jerusalem called attention to his interest in improving Catholic-Jewish relations. In an unprecedented way, the pope has recognized the sins of members of the church with regard to the Jewish people and other Christians. In asking forgiveness from others, however, he has never recognized the sins of the church as such—just the sins of members of the church. If one accepts a Vatican II understanding of the church as the people of God, then one must admit that the church itself is sinful and has offended others in the course of history and continues to do so today.

From the beginning of his pontificate John Paul II has called for dialogue among Christians. His 1995 encyclical *Ut unum sint* asks the leaders of non-Roman Catholic churches to help him to find a way of exercising primacy that will respond to some of their objections. He has devoted great effort to forging closer relations with the Orthodox Church.

But many of his efforts have been rebuffed. For example, he has not even been able to visit Moscow. And little or no progress has been made in dialogue with Protestant churches. Although some documents of joint affirmations have been signed, new issues have arisen that have created more obstacles in the ecumenical task. John Paul II has often cited moral issues, such as differing views on divorce and homosexual relations, as barriers to ecumenism. Many of the reasons why ecumenism has not had more positive results in his papacy stem from his understanding and governance of the Roman Catholic Church itself.

It is indeed somewhat ironic that John Paul II's papacy has been criticized more heavily within the Catholic Church than outside it. Even moderate critics such as David Gibson and Peter Steinfels have pointed out in recent months the need for some significant changes in the church. Polls and anecdotal evidence show numbers of Catholics leaving the church or disenchanted with it.

John Paul II has resisted calls for change in many areas, including those where he himself recognizes that change is possible. Because of a shortage of celibate clergy, many people in the Western world are being deprived of the eucharistic celebration. The Catholic Church has always seen the Eucharist as the heart and center of its life. Now a human-made law on clergy celibacy is preventing more and more people from participating in the Eucharist. The sacrament of penance has faded into disuse for the vast majority of Roman Catholics, but the pope refuses to allow a communal celebration of penance, which has been meaningful for many people even when it has been used illegally.

Many Catholic women have found themselves alienated from the Catholic Church because of its stand on the ordination of women and women's role in the church. Non-Catholics have little idea of the animosity even among elderly religious women toward the papacy.

The pope has been unwilling to make any changes in the church's teaching against artificial contraception, even though the vast majority of Catholics disregard this teaching. For many, the Catholic Church has lost all credibility in the matter of sexuality.

The Catholic Church has become more centralized and authoritarian under John Paul II's papacy. The concept of collegiality (all the bishops together with the pope forming a college to govern the church) articulated by Vatican II has not materialized. The Synod of Bishops that meets on a regular basis to discuss problems in the church plays only an advisory role to the pope. Vatican documents have expanded the role of the Roman Curia at the expense of diocesan bishops and have called for greater hierarchical control of Catholic universities. The Vatican appoints as bishops only those who are safe and have never expressed any disagreement with papal teaching or policy. Some critics have argued that the poor performance of American bishops in the clergy sex-abuse scandals is a consequence of the type of bishops who have been appointed by Rome.

Structural change is needed to give more importance to collegiality and a greater voice for all in the church. Such a change will not be a panacea, but without such change the Catholic Church will find it difficult to be faithful to its mission as a pilgrim church.

Common wisdom maintains that the cardinals who will elect the new pope, being appointees of John Paul II himself, will want to continue along his path. But maybe not. The vast majority of the voting cardinals are diocesan bishops who have chafed somewhat under the growing centralization of the Vatican. Many of them might be quite willing to put into practice the theory that the local bishop is not just a delegate of the pope and that all the bishops of the world together with the pope have a solicitude for the church universal.

All of them recognize, for example, that clerical celibacy is a human-made law that can change in order to protect and promote more important values. Making other changes, such as admitting past error in sexual teachings and the ordination of women, will be harder to come by.

But anyone familiar with the history of the Catholic Church knows that change begins on the grass-roots level. I sometimes think that liberal Catholics put too much emphasis on the Second Vatican Council, thereby reinforcing the notion that change in the Catholic Church originates at the top. While I wholeheartedly agree with the council and what it opened up, there never would have been a Vatican II if it were not for the biblical, liturgical, catechetical and ecumenical movements that came from the grass roots.