
POPE JOHN PAUL THE GREAT: ENGAGING THE CULTURE

by Rev. Kenneth A. France-Kelly, O.P.

THROUGHOUT HIS EIGHTY-FOUR years, Karol Wojtyla, the actor, poet, playwright, laborer, author, carver, professor, philosopher, and theologian—whether as layman, priest, bishop, cardinal, or pope—engaged the culture and times in which he lived. He felt compelled to speak for those who had no voice and with those who were beginning to find their voice.

With his election to the papacy in 1978, Pope John Paul the Great no longer saw this giving voice as just a challenge but a duty and obligation. He now had greater influence than ever before. He did not shrink from this contest or this new influence but welcomed it.

During his life, especially during the nearly twenty-seven years of his papacy, he directed most of his attention and effort to three areas:

- the challenge of totalitarian regimes
- the promotion of the culture of life in a world ever eager to embrace the culture of death
- the willingness to appeal to the idealism of youth so as to bring out the best in them.

Engaging Tyranny and Oppression: The Fall of Communism

Karol Wojtyla had borne the yoke of tyranny and oppression from his

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youth. As priest and bishop, he stood up to the Polish government officials, the puppets of the Soviet Communist Party.

The new industrial city of Nowa Huta needed a Catholic church. Deep Polish Catholicism and Polish Communism soon clashed in the fields of Nowa Huta. This new city would have a Catholic Church, and Cardinal Wojtyla was determined to lead his flock in any peaceful manner to get it. Polish Catholicism prevailed!

In June 1979, Pope John Paul II, while celebrating Mass in Victory Plaza in Warsaw, at the beginning of his first papal visit to his homeland, prayed for the outpouring of the Spirit “to renew the face of the earth,” and then he added extemporaneously, “and the face of Poland.”

This deliberate insertion into the prepared text has been identified as the spark that ignited a peaceful revolution in Poland, an uprising of faith-filled nationalism that eventually brought down the Communist government. Also, it was with the strong support of Pope John Paul II that Lech Walesa and the Solidarity workers’ movement toppled Communism and eventually brought democracy to Poland.

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in Eastern Europe in recent years would not have been possible without the presence of this Pope, without the great role, even political, that he has played on the world scene.” Several weeks after this pronouncement by Gorbachev, Pope John Paul II, referring to the fall of Communism throughout Eastern Europe, said, “The claim to build a world without God has been shown to be an illusion.”

Neither ideology nor culture contains the perfect answer to the evils of the world or the longings of the human spirit. Christ is the answer! Gospel values contain the

key to responding to the ills of humankind.

**Engaging Hedonism:
The Culture of Death
vs. The Culture of Life**

Pope John Paul II, who had witnessed the horrors of war and the genocide of the Nazi regime, was always eager to promote the culture of life. He knew that the freedom given to humanity under democracy was just as much a threat to the sanctity of human life as the power and influence of totalitarian regimes.

In his fourth encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), Pope John Paul II intended to reinforce the 1968 encyclical of Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, and study the scriptural and doctrinal underpinnings of human life in depth, as well as to promote and strengthen the culture of life. In the eyes of Pope John Paul II, there existed in the world an “enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the ‘culture of death’ and the ‘culture of life.’” This could be seen in the legalizing of abortion and in the beginnings of the legalization of euthanasia.

In *Evangelium Vitae* Pope John Paul II noted the increasing sensitivity of present-day society to human rights issues; how troubling, then, that our society displays such insensitivity to the rightful claims of its most vulnerable members: the unborn, the elderly, and terminally ill persons. All human life must be welcomed and desired as a great good for humanity; and humanity must see to it that the primary value of every individual is reaffirmed.

Pope John Paul encouraged all to try to recover the true meaning of the human person, and thus the meaning of life. “Man’s life comes

from God; it is his gift, his image and imprint, a sharing in his breath of life. God therefore is the sole Lord of this life: man cannot do with it as he wills,” and, again, “We need to promote a serious and in-depth exchange about basic issues of human life with everyone, including non-believers, in intellectual circles, in the various professional spheres and at the level of people’s everyday life... All together, we must build a new culture of life.”

Even in his own life, and in the way in which he faced death, John Paul witnessed to the sanctity of life and the extent to which the human person should strive, using normal means, to sustain that life. His writings give testimony to those beliefs and his actions show the depth of those personal convictions.

**Engaging Youth:
World Youth Days**

Since early adulthood, Karol Wojtyla had been involved with youth: in the theater, doing dramatic poetry reading, and engaging in discussion and study groups. The world of ideas was his recreation and Karol Wojtyla was re-created in this milieu. As priest, and later as bishop, whether in the classroom or in the Tatry Mountains, he worked with young people, debated ideas with his university students, camped and canoed with them, and served as their confidant and priest.

On Easter Sunday 1984, at the conclusion of the Holy Year celebrating the Jubilee of the Redemption, Pope John Paul II entrusted to young people the Cross of Christ. He challenged them to “carry it throughout the world as a symbol of Christ’s love for humanity, and announce to everyone that only in the death and resurrection of Christ we can find

salvation and redemption.” Nearly twenty years later in 2003 John Paul introduced something new to the traditions surrounding World Youth Day. The icon of Our Lady, *Salus Populi Romani*, would accompany the cross on its pilgrimage. He said: “today I also entrust to the delegation from Germany the Icon of Mary. From now on it will accompany the World Youth Days, together with the Cross. Behold, your Mother! It will be a sign of Mary’s motherly presence close to young people who are called, like the Apostle John, to welcome her into their lives.”

On Palm Sunday 1985, he issued an apostolic letter, *Dilecti Amici*, to the youth of the world on the occasion of the International Youth Year. In this letter he established World Youth Day. For John Paul II the purpose of World Youth Day was threefold:

- *to be hope*: to bring the young together to remind them of the strength and confidence they bring to the Catholic Church today
- *to promote hope*: to help youth deal with the fears of life; and, at the same time, remind them of the role they have to play in preventing the spread of fear while helping humanity find its way and rediscover hope
- *to engender hope*: to gather the young people of the world together and thus reenergize humanity in the hopes it has placed in the youth of the world.

The Legacy of Pope John Paul the Great

The impact of Pope John Paul II on the second half of the twentieth century is undeniable. His influence on the history of the Catholic

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Church and international affairs is sizeable. His short-term impact on the culture is evident, yet the magnitude of his effect on the culture of civilization remains to be seen.

Whether the rule of democracy, dictatorship, socialism, Communism, or monarchy will prevail in the centuries to come is left to history. What can be said is that one man, inspired by the Holy Spirit, changed the flow of history in the latter half of the twentieth century. For a brief moment, in a number of places where oppression had reigned, freedom was unleashed over the face of the earth.

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Whether annual observances of World Youth Day continue past the pontificate of Benedict XVI, or pass into history as a dream of old European popes, is a question that will be answered as the future unfolds. What is clear to us now is that during the past quarter century, more than 15,000,000 young people have been inspired with enthusiasm for the Catholic Faith. With God’s help, a rebirth of the Church is on the horizon!

What is also certain is that, whether it survives the decade or lasts a century, Pope John Paul II will be considered a holy man of greatness whom God lent to the Church for a brief moment; and for that time, he labored tirelessly to touch the core of humanity—its culture, its life. ■■

[Editor’s note: Since 1999, Father Kenneth France-Kelly, O.P. has been the director of The Rosary Shrine of Saint Jude. Currently he is engaged in parochial work and itinerant preaching, and he is Chaplain for the Dominican Laity at Saint Louis Bertrand Parish in Louisville, Kentucky.]

References

1. John Paul II, encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, (March 25, 1995), 28.
2. *Ibid.*, 39.
3. *Ibid.*, 95.