NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Popes of the 20th Century: John Paul II

Richard McBrien | Aug. 30, 2010 Essays in Theology

When Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, then archbishop of Kraków, was elected pope in October, 1978, he was convinced that he had received a providential mission to lead the church into the Third Christian Millennium.

He also viewed his election as compensation for Polish sufferings during the 19th century and then again under the Nazis and the Communists in the 20th.

It was his belief that he had a special responsibility to bring the insights and values of the suffering church of the East to the comfortable churches of the West and to bring an end to what he and other conservative cardinals regarded as the postconciliar drift of the church. Whether intended or not, this was a pointed criticism of Paul VI.

John Paul II?s conviction was in striking contrast to Pope Paul VI?s more humble self-assessment that he had been called to the papacy to ?suffer something for the Church so that it will be clear that it is the Lord, and not anyone else, who guides and saves it.?

Throughout John Paul II?s pontificate the contrast between his style of being pope and Paul VI?s became clearer almost by the day. John Paul II never questioned the validity of his convictions; Paul VI was constantly afflicted with feelings of self-doubt.

Both styles had their strengths and drawbacks. John Paul II was always strong-willed and firm in the exercise of his papal authority. But at the same time he gave many the impression that he had a stubborn personality and that he was impatient with anyone who dared to differ with him.

Paul VI, on the other hand, too often gave the appearance of being a hand-wringer -- someone who was convinced that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. On the other hand, he had a sympathetic, compassionate heart. He never wanted to crush anyone under foot.

Perhaps an even better comparison could be made between John Paul II and Pius XII. Unlike Pius XII -- who was aloof, austere, and aristocratic in bearing -- John Paul II was earthy and blunt and very much at home in the limelight.

The two popes, however, also had much in common -- including their profound, yet sentimental, devotion to the Blessed Mother. Pius XII defined the dogma of the Assumption in 1950 and declared a Marian Year in 1954. John Paul II wrote a major encyclical on Mary and declared a Marian Year as well in 1987.

Both popes were also severe with theologians, mainly through the hard-line prefects of their respective doctrinal congregations -- the Holy Office under Cardinal Ottaviani, and the Congre-gation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Cardinal Ratzinger.

Both popes were prolific in their official writings. Pius XII published over 30 encyclicals, while John Paul II produced 14 such letters.

What they also had in common, finally, were their relatively lengthy pontificates. Pius XII was in office over 19 years; John Paul II over 26.

As a result many young Catholics grew up in the 1940s and 1950s knowing only Pius XII as their pope, while many Catholics of the 1980s and 1990s grew to young adulthood knowing only John Paul II as their pope. For such Catholics there was only one way of being pope: Pius XII?s or John Paul II?s.

When the final assessment of John Paul II?s long pontificate is rendered, it is likely that historians will notice the sharp contrast between the pope?s major successes on the extra-ecclesial front and his equally major failures on the intra-ecclesial front.

His ?foreign policy,? as it were, was marked by achievements in his outreach to Jews in particular, but also to other non-Christian religions as well. His controversial gathering of many religious leaders to pray together for world peace in Assisi in 1986 was surely one of the high-water marks of his pontificate.

So, too, were his efforts on behalf of rapprochement with the communist world, of which he was so personally familiar from his years in his native Poland -- to which he made nine trips as pope.

His governance of the Church itself yielded a far different record. He revoked Hans Küng?s status as a Catholic theologian and disciplined other major theologians as well -- including the Dutch Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx, the Brazilian Franciscan Leonardo Boff, and the American moral theologian Charles Curran.

His appointments to the hierarchy followed such a relentlessly conservative pattern that he was able to transform the hierarchy for generations to come.

But no blot on his domestic record looms larger than his failure to address the enormity of the sexual-abuse crisis in the priesthood. Sadly, he was in denial from the start.

© 2010 Richard P. McBrien. All rights reserved. Fr. McBrien is the Crowley-O?Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Related columns:

- Popes of the 20th Century: Paul VI [1], Aug. 23, 2010
- Popes of the 20th Century: John XXIII [2], Aug. 17, 2010
- Popes of the 20th century: Introduction [3], Aug. 9, 2010

* * *

Editor's Note: We can send you an e-mail alert every time Fr. McBrien's column, "Essays in Theology," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow direc-tions: **E-mail alert sign-up** [4]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Essays in Theol-ogy" to your list.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/04/2015 - 23:17*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/popes-20th-century-john-paul-ii

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/popes-20th-century-paul-vi
[2] http://ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/popes-20th-century-john-xxiii

[3] http://ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/popes-20th-century
[4] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup