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Beatification of John Paul II leaves many Catholics cold

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jan. 27, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

COLUMN

By their nature, metaphors allow us ?to make journeys,? ?to go beyond? a point that we could not otherwise pass.

Metaphors enrich us by their connotations -- the rich allusions and meanings that they deliver as a cloud of witnesses to a broadened and deepened truth about a person or an event.

One of the most common metaphors applied to the soon-to-be-beatified Pope John Paul II tells us more than the hagiographic musings of such apologists as George Weigel, who, as a biographer with books to sell, has a conflict of interest as big as a redwood in his eye.

The late pope -- whose heroic stands as a cardinal archbishop against Polish Communism undoubtedly changed history by pulling the bricks out of the crumbling universe of the Soviet Union -- has been lionized as the coolest of cold warriors.

The metaphor that spontaneously arose to describe him as a pope, however, is ?rock star.? Stand back as, like rock fans everywhere, John Paul II?s followers stampede for tickets to his beatification ceremony.

?Rock star? is also applied to former President Bill Clinton and to others who, by their demanding charismatic style, suck all the air out of any room or space that they enter. ?Rock stars? need neither an introduction nor an opening act to prepare the audience for their appearance.

They are, however, a lot of work. You have to pay so much undivided attention to them while they are on stage that you may feel your own reserves of energy being drained away as you are called upon to fill and to re-fill the swimming pool-size tanks of the ?rock stars?? own need.

What is that need exactly? It isn?t for you as a person, but for them as personalities that run on unquestioned loyalty and unconditional love. ?Rock stars? gleam attractively, giving their audiences the equivalent of a double cheeseburger with fries on the side. But it won?t last for take-out; they have to eat it there.

Was John Paul II acclaimed as a ?rock star? by accident or did it express the *sensus fidelium*, the natural judgment of believers, about this pope who stood so tall as he smiled so enigmatically at the crowds that stretched to the horizon about him?

The metaphor suggests other questions. If John Paul knew how to make himself -- or part of himself -- present to a crowd, how much of himself did he ever really reveal to anybody? How well did you know the real man, Karol Wojtyla?

Are there unanswered questions about this pope who may have dazzled but seemed to exude so little real

warmth for the believers at whom, above his Slavic smile, he never seemed to look directly?

What was the inner man -- for this must be the testing point for the blessed -- like when, claiming to be a champion for personalism, he preached of human personality as divided rather than united? What was he like when, in his romantic but self-contained reflections on human sexuality, he spoke so abstractly but with such certainty that abstaining from sex was the highest ideal even for married couples?

Who was this man who sang the glories of the Blessed Mother but who kept real women beyond the end of his wagging finger and was determined, as if the fate of the world depended on it, to keep them out of the priesthood? Who was this man who always defended Paul VI?s *Humanae Vitae*, but who absented himself from the final vote of the Vatican II commission that recommended a broadening of the church?s position on birth control?

Who was this man who looked away from the burgeoning sex abuse scandal of his clergy while he sheltered and defended the godfather of all sex abusers, Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado? Who was he when he welcomed Cardinal Law to a Roman sinecure after Law was forced to resign from the archbishopric of Boston for his manner of dealing with sex abusing priests?

There is no doubt that John Paul II was a great man, but he leaves too great a void of coolness about his personality to hurry his beatification. He probably ranks with such other great world saving figures of the 20th century as Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, each of whom was a ?rock star? in his own time.

The personality of each, as is true of many great men, bore a rich inlay of narcissism, marked by a self-absorption and need for constant adulation that exhausted everyone around them, including their families.

Perhaps Pope John Paul II leaves many cold because the elements of narcissism within his own personality telegraph themselves invisibly to others.

Should this keep him from being beatified? Probably not, but perhaps it should prompt second thoughts about fast tracking his canonization.

Pope Benedict might ponder his predecessor?s enormous self-absorption, his actor?s sense of timing and his arranging that nobody ever stood next to him when the picture was taken, and wonder why, great or not, he still leaves many Catholics cold.

Narcissists shine brightly but cast a cold shadow. Perhaps that is why so many believers ruefully conclude, ?Johnny, we hardly knew ye.?

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