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In death as in life, John Paul a sign of contradiction

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 26, 2011 NCR Today

ROME -- Pope John Paul II reigned for almost 27 years, and during that time he was often a sign of contradiction ? a charismatic and beloved figure around the world who also stirred strong opposition in several different camps, including church reformers, social progressives, and Catholic traditionalists.

The May 1 beatification of the late pope seems to be generating a similar range of reactions. While critics object to both the speed of the beatification and what some see as the political agenda underlying it, Rome is preparing for a tidal wave of devotees, a host of books and TV programs are celebrating the life and legacy of John Paul II, and new polling suggests that the late pontiff, six years after his death, remains remarkably popular at the grassroots.

Many of those objecting to the beatification tend to put special emphasis on a perceived failure by the Vatican under John Paul II to respond adequately to the Catholic sexual abuse crisis. *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd yesterday put the argument in typically blunt fashion: ?How can you be a saint if you fail to protect innocent children??

From a decidedly different perspective, the breakaway Society of St. Pius X, which objects to liberal currents in Catholicism since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), has announced that it regards the beatification as a serious new obstacle to reunion with Rome, since John Paul II was the author of an inter-religious summit in Assisi in 1986 which traditionalists regarded as an exercise in religious relativism.

How history will judge John Paul remains to be seen, but in the here and now, evidence suggests that most people continue to see the late pope favorably.

A new poll released today conducted by the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion in Poughkeepsie, New York, found that 74 percent of Americans generally, and an overwhelming 90 percent of American Catholics, believe that John Paul is a good candidate for the honor of beatification.

The same poll found that almost 60 percent of Americans believe that John Paul was either the best pope of the Catholic church or among the best, with 82 percent of American Catholics saying the same thing. Only two percent of Americans, and less than one percent of American Catholics, believe John Paul II was either the worst pope or among the worst.

The poll, conducted in mid-April, was sponsored by the Knights of Columbus.

In Rome, the old John Paul magic is very much in the air. The city is festooned with banners with the late pope?s image and sayings (including a famous line he once offered in the traditional Roman dialect, ?Dàmose da fa?! Semo Romani!? ? ?Let?s get going! We?re Romans!?) On Saturday evening, many Romans are planning to light candles in their windows in honor of the late pope, whose beatification is the next day.

At present, city officials say they expect roughly two million people to take part in the various beatification-

related events, with a crowd of at least 300,000 expected turn out for the beatification Mass on Sunday celebrated by Pope Benedict XVI.

The city of Rome has allocated almost $6 million to cover expenses for the event, including extra police protection, cleaning services and transportation. Eight churches in the center of Rome will stay open throughout Saturday night to accommodate pilgrims wishing to pray, and the Vatican Museums have announced extended opening hours up to midnight throughout this week.

Taking advantage of the John Paul boomlet, the Catholic charitable organization Caritas in the Rome diocese has announced that it?s renaming a major feeding and social service center near the main train station Termini in honor of the late pope, hoping to piggyback on the beatification to raise $4 million for renovation.

Throughout this week, events are taking place in Rome commemorating the life and legacy of John Paul II, including concerts, art exhibits, and panel discussions featuring people who worked closely with him, such as Cardinal Camillo Ruini, former president of the Italian bishops? conference, and Spanish layman Joaquin Navarro-Valls, the late pope?s spokesperson.

Virtually every nationally distributed Italian publication has a special issue in honor of John Paul II, and programs dedicated to the late pope are a staple of this week?s TV line-up.

Monday night, for instance, the most-watched current affairs program in Italy, ?Porta a Porta?, focused on the assassination attempt against John Paul II on May 13, 1981. Thirty years later it?s still not clear who, if anyone, was actually behind Mehmet Ali A?ca?s attempt on John Paul?s life, in part because Ali A?ca himself has given such shifting accounts ? by one estimate, he?s offered 51 different versions of events. Journalists Marco Ansaldo and Yasemïn Ta?kin have a new book out arguing that the radical Turkish group the Gray Wolves is the most likely author of the plot, as opposed to the KGB.

Major news events often create markets for new books, and the beatification has occasioned a slew of new titles on John Paul II. Andrea Riccardi, the founder of the Sant?Egidio Community, has published a biography, billed as ?the first true biography written on a scientific and documentary basis.? Even Vatican officials are getting in on the act. The Vatican?s Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, has a book-length interview with journalist Michele Zannucchi titled *Un Cuore Grande: Omaggio a Giovanni Paolo II* (?A Great Heart: Tribute to John Paul II?).

On Thursday, Italy plans to issue a new national stamp in honor of John Paul II, featuring an image of the late pope from 1999, blessing of the statue of the Virgin Mary in Rome?s Piazza di Spagna. Friday night, a Roman parish is organizing a ?Via Lucis? procession (as opposed to the ?Via Crucis? of Good Friday) through the streets of the city, meditating on themes drawn from John Paul?s teaching at various World Youth Day events.

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