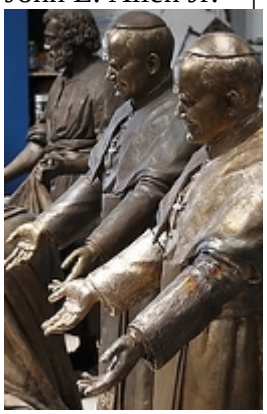
NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

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

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



Newly made bronze statues of Pope John Paul II are seen at Domus Dei artisan workshop in Albano Laziale, south of Rome, April 7. The workshop is making several large statues of the Polish pope for Italian squares as his May 1 beatification nears. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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.

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