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Towards the beatification of John Paul II

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 29, 2011 All Things Catholic

This morning, what one Roman priest has defined as the ?spiritual marathon? surrounding John Paul II?s beatification began. The opening act, so to speak, came with the removal of the late pope?s casket from its tomb, in preparation for its eventual placement in the chapel of St. Sebastian in the heart of St. Peter?s Basilica.

After a brief prayer service this morning led by the Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the casket was temporarily situated in front of St. Peter?s tomb under the basilica. The marble slab that once marked John Paul?s tomb is being shipped to Krakow, Poland, to be placed in a new church named for ?Blessed John Paul II.?

While all that?s in keeping with tradition, the beatification also boasts some very 21st century flourishes: the celebrations are being streamed live both on Facebook and Twitter, part of new media push by the Vatican under the name ?Digital Sentinels.?t

I?ve already written more than any one person probably should about the beatification of Pope John Paul II this Sunday, so rather than offering much additional commentary here, I?ll simply offer links to the various pieces I?ve already done for *NCR* and other news outlets.

Beyond that, I?ll offer three quick reflections to round out the picture.

NCR postings

- Beatification Q&A #1: **What?s the rush?** [1]
- Beatification Q&A #2: **What?s the deal with miracles?** [2]
- Beatification Q&A #3: **Why make saints out of popes?** [3]
- Beatification Q&A #4: **What?s the Divine Mercy connection?** [4]
- Beatification Q&A #5: **Is it the pope or the papacy?** [5]
- **In Death as in Life, John Paul a Sign of Contradiction** [6]

Other media outlets

- ?**Fast-Track Saint** [7],? *Newsweek*
- ?**Politics of Saint-Making** [8],? BBC
- ?**Sainthood Explained: Understanding John Paul II?s Beatification** [9]?, CNN
- ?**Abuse Crisis Fuels Debate over John Paul?s Legacy** [10],? CNN

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Here are three brief, and basically random, additional thoughts.

First, I am obviously aware that there?s some ambivalence about the beatification of John Paul II in the wider world. One way I know this is that I was recently on a BBC program with Lavinia Byrne, a former nun who left her order in 2000 partly over her support for women priests. Apropos of papal travel, Byrne quipped that when John Paul arrived in a foreign country, he ?kissed the ground and walked on the women.? (Even the host felt compelled to say, ?Ouch!?)

If all you had to go on this week was the spirit in Rome, however, you wouldn?t know there?s much debate. I don?t just mean ecclesiastical Rome, i.e. the Vatican, but out in the streets and bars and living rooms of the city itself. I?ve spoken to a wide cross-section of Romans, from barbers and waiters to cops and bankers, and most strongly believe that John Paul deserves the honor being bestowed on him. I met one middle-aged cabbie, for instance, who said with tears in his eyes that John Paul made his kids want to go to church, something he had failed to accomplish as their own father.

For almost 27 years, John Paul II was not just the Supreme Pontiff but also the Bishop of Rome, and this ?pope from a distant country? came to be embraced by Romans as one of their own. (Roman streets this week are festooned with images of John Paul and a famous line he once uttered in the old Roman dialect.) In part, that?s because of his palpable love for the city. He visited virtually every Roman parish at least once, and he used to counsel seminarians to ?learn Rome,? meaning to get to know the city as a microcosm of the church. In part, of course, Romans also know that John Paul?s celebrity was a huge boon to the city?s tourist trade, and that his beatification this week is once again drawing a tidal wave of humanity into Roman hotels, shops, and restaurants.

Most basically, Romans seem terribly proud that this pope -- their pope -- mattered so much to the entire world.

(The current estimate is that roughly one million pilgrims should be on hand by Sunday, in addition to the turnout from the Romans themselves. Some 100,000 Poles are expected -- including Pawel Kurylo, a 39-year-old bricklayer who walked over 1,400 miles from Pruska Wielka, Poland, to Rome. He set out on March 25, he said, to prove that ?every Pole could be here, if only they want to badly enough.?)

Second, while some critics continue to question the ?rush? behind John Paul?s beatification, it?s worth remembering that it could have been a whole lot faster. Andrea Tornielli this week published a piece in *La Stampa* reminding us of something that was widely rumored back in 2005, when Pope Benedict XVI decided to waive the normal five-year waiting period to launch John Paul?s sainthood cause. To wit: The private secretary of John Paul, Stanislaw Dziwisz, now the Cardinal of Krakow, along with others, wanted Benedict to dispense with beatification altogether and move directly to canonization of John Paul II.

The idea wasn?t completely without precedent. For one thing, it had been considered three years earlier for Mother Teresa. The Secretary of State at the time, Italian Cardinal Angelo Sodano, quietly sent letters to the cardinals of the Roman Curia, in the name of John Paul II, asking what they would think about dispensing with beatification for Mother Teresa and moving straight to canonization. Reportedly John Paul II was open to the idea, but opted against it because there wasn?t a consensus among the cardinals. Further, some experts on the sainthood process say that the traditional distinction between beatification as an act for the local church, and canonization for the universal church, breaks down in the case of global celebrities such as Mother Teresa and John Paul.

This time around, Benedict XVI once again consulted informally, and once again drew the conclusion that a consensus didn?t exist. Hence, he decided to follow the normal process, with the lone exception of dispensing with the waiting period.

In terms of how long it might take to arrive at canonization, Tornielli pointed to the example of Padre Pio, who

was beatified in 1999 and canonized just three years later in 2002. The same brief arc, he suggested, could apply to John Paul II.

Third, one of the more amusing pieces of commentary this week came in Thursday?s *Corriere della Sera* by famed Italian journalist Vittorio Messori, who collaborated with John Paul II on the 1994 book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*.

Struck by the cavalcade of alleged acquaintances of the late pope coming out of the woodwork to offer personal remembrances, Messori said there?s no end in sight, in part because John Paul met such a vast throng of people over the course of 14 years as Archbishop of Krakow and almost 27 years as pope. If you took just the roster of people who had been invited to lunch with the pope or to attend a Mass in his private chapel, Messori wrote, that group alone would be big enough to fill St. Peter?s Square.

I certainly can?t join that cavalcade. I met John Paul only a few times over the years, mostly after his physical decline had begun and his ability to communicate was reduced. Still, I can offer a couple of quick ?John Paul moments?, both of which illustrate one oft-mentioned feature of his personality: He was a pope of surprises.

The first comes from May 2001, when John Paul II visited Greece. I had been asked by Greek TV to give them an interview offering insight into the trip, and one of the questions they asked was whether John Paul II would apologize for mistreatment of the Orthodox. I responded that John Paul II had by that point already apologized for many past wrongs of the church, including offenses against the Orthodox, but normally these apologies are carefully prepared and don?t just fall out of the clear blue sky. My sound-bite was something like the following: ?Anyone expecting John Paul to offer an apology on this trip is probably going to be disappointed.?

As it happened, the Greeks aired that interview on national television just before John Paul?s meeting with Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens and All Greece. Thus it was that no more than five minutes after it ended, John Paul II proceeded to issue precisely the apology that I just confidently predicted would not come.

After the fact, I met with Renato Boccardo, today the Archbishop of Spoleto but at the time John Paul?s trip planner, to find out what had happened. Boccardo explained that in his last preparatory meeting with the Orthodox before the trip, they had asked if there would be an apology. Boccardo said he told them what I told Greek TV -- the pope?s already apologized, and anyway there isn?t enough time to prepare. Just days before the trip, he said, he met with the pope, and mentioned the Orthodox request. John Paul, he said, thought for a moment and then said, Si puo fare ? ?it can be done.? Thus the apology was added, to the surprise of many ? including, of course, amateur prognosticators such as myself.

The second such episode comes from Toronto in 2002, where John Paul attended World Youth Day.

By that stage in his travels, John Paul?s movements were restricted, and he was no longer walking up and down the stairs of the papal plane. Instead, one of the hydraulic lifts used to convey food service to the back of the plane had been specially rigged for the pope. He would be helped out of his car and onto the lift, which would then be raised to the side door by the cockpit, and John Paul would then walk to his seat. When the plane arrived, the process would be reversed, so that John Paul would emerge from the rear of the plane to be greeted by the landing party.

There was strong media interest in the Toronto trip, partly because the American sexual abuse crisis had erupted earlier that year, and World Youth Day was expected to bring the pope?s first public comments in his own voice since those upheavals began. Thus the moment the plane landed my cell phone rang, and I immediately began offering live commentary as a voice-over for CNN?s coverage of the arrival ceremony.

One of the hosts asked if John Paul was about to come down the stairs of the plane, and I explained at some

length that he didn?t do that anymore because of his declining health. Mid-sentence, the host interrupted to ask where I was standing. I replied that I was on the tarmac with my back to the papal plane, and she suggested that I look over my shoulder ? where, of course, John Paul II was clearly visible making his way down the stairs, precisely what I had just said he was no longer capable of doing.

Later, John Paul II told organizers that it was important to him to walk down under his own power, because he wanted the young people to understand from the very beginning how much it meant to him to be with them.

Like so many of my colleagues over the years, I learned the hard way: Never be too confident about what John Paul II was going to do, because just when you thought you had him figured out, he?d fool you.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. He can be reached at jallen@ncronline.org.]

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