

Beatification of JP II: Interview with Cardinal Francis George

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 1, 2011 NCR Today

ROME -- Cardinal Francis George of Chicago was appointed a bishop by Pope John Paul II three different times: first in Yakima, Washington, in 1990, then as archbishop of Portland in 1996, and finally as archbishop of Chicago in 1997. One year later, John Paul also elevated George to the College of Cardinals.

Those repeated demonstrations of papal confidence may help explain why George, 74, wanted to be on hand for the May 1 beatification of John Paul II.

As fate would have it, George left for Rome amid a controversy in Chicago over his suspension of the high-profile, charismatic Fr. Michael Pfleger, known for his social activism, especially on behalf of African-Americans. (Pfleger has repeatedly refused to accept a transfer from his present parish.) Chicago area media asked George to explain how much time he was willing to give Pfleger, and George replied that was mostly up to him.

"We'll be in conversation at some point, I hope," George said.

While in Rome, George also agreed to sit down for an interview with NCR about the beatification of John Paul II -- including his take on criticism that the beatification has been rushed, and that the sexual abuse crisis casts a shadow over John Paul's legacy.

The following is a transcript of George's interview, which took place on April 30 at the North American College in Rome.

NCR: At a symbolic level, the legacy of a saint often can be expressed fairly simply. St. Francis was the great lover of the earth and all its creatures, Mother Teresa was a servant of the poor, St. John Vianney was the patron of priests. What's the simple idea that will be associated with John Paul II?

George: I hadn't thought about that before, but what about "evangelizer of the world"? I could go on to several others, but that's what comes to mind first.

Why?

It comes from his great desire, once he had the office of the papacy, to implement the council. He showed us that the Second Vatican Council was an ecumenical council. He took it upon himself to preach the gospel of Christ to a divided world. That was the purpose of calling the council, according to John XXIII. John Paul implemented that, using his office as a base, but then also with his own personal charism.

What's interesting about Vatican II's document on the church, *Lumen Gentium*, is that for the first time it puts its discussion of the office of bishops and others in the church together with charisms in the church. A charism is always a grace given to someone for the sake of others. I think John Paul, quite intentionally, put together his office with the personal charism of an intellectual, a poet, a philosopher, a dramatist, a linguist. By so doing, he

created a vehicle for evangelizing the world, seeing the world through its savior. That was unique, and I think it will be his legacy.

Two hundred years from now, when the living memory of John Paul II is gone, do you think that will still be what looms largest about him?

I think so, because it's bound up with office. It's also bound up with charism, which is what was so attractive about John Paul. That's especially so in the States, because ever since Kennedy we've defined leadership primarily as charismatic. Yet it's office that perdures, and as the vicar of Christ he took it upon himself to introduce the world to Christ, and that will continue I'm sure. The way of doing it is not replaceable, but the office continues.

You believe that John Paul redefined the office of the papacy, giving it a more evangelical character?

I believe so, but he was following the council. The council defined itself as evangelical. What he did was say, here's what that means for the office of the papacy. It means a lot of things, as we have seen, for everybody else in the church. He followed the council, and the council's idea of the church. As an icon of the church, so to speak, he had to do the same thing. I don't think he was so much redefining the office as putting the office within the council's understanding of mission.

That amounted to a redefinition, didn't it?

Yes, but it's not that he was being original. He used his charisms to implement the council's vision of the church as applied to the office of the papacy. When we talk about things like this, sometimes we reduce it to his personal initiative. He did it quite purposefully because he felt that's what the office called for. It's not just because it's what he liked to do, or because he was good at it.

But he was good at it ?

Oh, of course. That's the providential part of it, where office and charism come together.

What about the criticism that the beatification is happening too fast?

The process was respected, as Benedict XVI has said. It started five years earlier than it ordinarily would have. Francis of Assisi, who's my patron, was canonized 18 months after his death, so it has happened before in the history of the church. In the church, of course, everything has happened at least once!

It is extraordinary, but this was an extraordinary person and an extraordinary papacy. The people who were with him for more than 26 years, and the young people who were born during his papacy, had a sense throughout those years of a holy person ? throughout the travels, throughout the work and the use of his physical abilities, and then the use of his disabilities to show how a disciple suffers. If the question is holiness, there's not much doubt.

You met John Paul II many times. Were you convinced you were in the presence of a living saint?

I don't think I thought in terms of 'saint.' I was deeply convinced that I was in the presence of a profoundly prayerful man, who lived with the Lord. I think that's sanctity, even though I didn't think in terms of sanctity. When you went in to see Wojtyla, you were also with the Lord. You knew that.

How did you know that?

In conversation, he was a great listener. He could listen to you and listen to the Lord at the same time. I had the sense that he wasn't just listening to me, but that he was listening to me with the Lord, who would tell him what he was supposed to do in light of what I was telling him. He didn't give a lot of advice. He listened carefully, and he absorbed contexts. The great context for him, of course, was faith. You were brought into his context, even as you were bringing him your world, and he put it together.

You mention John Paul didn't give much advice. One of the knocks against him was that he didn't pay enough attention to governance, to actually running the church. What do you make of that?

Since I wasn't involved in the governance of the church at the curial level in Rome, I don't know. We heard that criticism from time to time. We heard it in the curias of the religious orders when I was here in Rome. I had the impression, however, that he was in charge of the big issues. He made decisions at a certain level, and then he let others carry them out. Whether he followed the carrying out closely, I'm not sure. That he knew about the big issues and gave directions on them in a specific way was, I think, clear.

Now, the church here, and in large dioceses such as my own, exists in silos. You can give directions, but they're not necessarily shared with everybody. That's part of a bureaucracy, and the man who could have handled it best, and who did try to handle it well, was Paul VI. He was a consummate curialist, but it was daunting. I think it's a problem intrinsic to curial government. John Paul didn't solve it, but I think he used the curia where he had to. The church was governed. You knew whose hands it was in.

What about the criticism of John Paul in terms of his handling of the sexual abuse crisis? Does that cast a shadow over his legacy?

The crisis casts a terrible shadow over the entire church and all of its bishops, as well, of course, as the priests who abused. It's a shadow that will remain with us, I think. We have to sort it out historically in years to come.

Two things could be said, however. First of all, when John Paul first began to realize there was a real problem here, he called in 2001 for all the cases to be sent to Rome and reviewed. Before 2001, these cases didn't come to Rome. The only cases that came to Rome were when you might want to try to laicize someone, but this was not by itself reason for laicization because the priest had to ask for it and so on.

Further, he put it not in the hands of the Congregation for Clergy, but in the hands of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. He was a morally upright man whom John Paul trusted. Ratzinger began to review the dossiers, and then in 2002 we were able to negotiate the special norms. It was because of the experience that followed bringing the cases to Rome that when the U.S. bishops came here to ask for a change in the code itself, we were heard. It was an argument, but we were heard.

Besides that, go back to your earlier question about who was running the shop. The pope, or anybody in a large organization, inherits a church. What you know about it is what people tell you. He knew what people told him, and he didn't know anything more than that. Leaders don't have infused knowledge! When he found out something, he reacted to it.

Is it fair to say that on those occasions when cases got to Rome in during most of the John Paul years, they weren't handled by the standards we would apply today?

We couldn't handle them that way. The law was different.

Your argument is that even if we might now say some of those cases were not handled well, John Paul acted on the basis of integrity?

Certainly, yes. I have no doubt about that at all.

How do you think your people in Chicago feel about what's happening here this weekend?

I haven't tried to do an opinion poll. We have a very large Polish population, some first generation but also second, third, fourth, fifth generation. He's held in special veneration by the Poles, so if you look at Chicago as Polonia, the support would be overwhelming without any doubt. Chicago is the largest city in Polonia, meaning Poland outside Poland.

Beyond that, I suppose it might sort out according to people's ideological positions. Those who think that he didn't interpret the council but subverted it would not be happy with this, and there are some who feel that way. Those who were energized by him would feel differently, especially the ones who went to the World Youth Days such as the one in Denver [in 1993]. There are still people who went to that who remember him. They would be very pleased with this.

I think the ordinary Catholic knows he was a great pope and would be pleased.

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