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Blessed John Paul II: Clio Awaits

Michael Sean Winters | May. 2, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

The beatification of Pope John Paul II explains more about us than it does about him. The chants of ?Santo subito!? at his funeral came from people who loved him deeply. They may or may not have agreed with any particular decision of his as Pope. They may have supported or opposed the general thrust of his pontificate, reaching out to the world at the same time as he demanded greater conformity within the Church. Still, the shouts came: ?Santo subito!? Pope John Paul II was loved, even by those who were ambivalent about his pontificate.

The other day, a young woman with whom I work spoke of being moved to tears when she first saw Pope John Paul II in person. It was his personal magnetism and human approachability that so moved her. ?For me, there was something so human about him,? she told me. She disavowed any sense of hero-worship and knew the late Pontiff did not work on water. But, she loved him. This love for Pope John Paul II certainly justifies his being raised to the honor of the altars as far as I am concerned but, then, I am nearly a Universalist who believes we must hold on to the hope that we all will get to heaven.

Nothing that happens in Rome today, however, can keep Clio from turning her gaze away from the love in which Pope John Paul II was held and examining the man and his pontificate. The verdict of history is never subito. Think of how highly unpopular Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson were when they left office? But, with the passage of time, the soundness and far-sightedness of the decisions they made have raised the estimation in which they are held enormously. Truman?s desegregation of the military and his willingness to let the Dixiecrats walk out of the 1948 convention are seen as seminal while his commitment to postwar Europe, enshrined in the Marshall Plan and NATO, guaranteed peace and prosperity in Western Europe for generations. Johnson?s prosecution of the Vietnam War remains a stain on his career, but the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, Medicare and Medicaid, these were accomplishments that greatly changed America for the better.

It is not too soon, however, to recognize certain characteristics of Pope John Paul II?s reign that will survive the test of time and those which have already begun to slip from memory. A vibrant, robust man at the time of his election, John Paul II did not so much generate new dynamics in the papacy but he did put them on steroids. Pope John XXIII had abandoned the idea that no Pope should leave the Vatican, but he never went further than Loreto. Pope Paul VI went to Manila and Bombay, New York and the Holy Land. Pope John Paul II traveled the world. It was not just that he made more trips, it was that he traveled to countries that the powerful of the world don?t give a damn about and, upon arrival, knelt and kissed the soil. NATO was dispatched to Libya, a nation with important oil reserves, this year, but not to Ivory Coast, also beset by an incipient civil war but lacking in oil reserves. Pope John Paul II went to Ivory Coast. And to many other countries you and I would have trouble finding on a map. He brought the papacy to the poor of the world, and this was his greatest accomplishment. Future popes may not be able to manage his rigorous schedule, but no Pope will ever again confine himself to the precincts of Rome.

In the wake of Vatican II, certain ecclesial movements began to take flight. Pope Paul VI encouraged them but

Pope John Paul II went further. In groups like Opus Dei, Communione e Liberazione, Focolare, the community of Sant Egidio, and the Neo-Catechetical Way, John Paul II discerned the Holy Spirit at work and saw, too, the seeds of the Church?s future. This followed a long tradition of papal patronage of spiritual initiatives: In the Middle Ages, the mendicants turned to the papacy for protection and during the Counter-Reformation, the Jesuits similarly looked to Rome when local bishops obstructed them. World Youth Day, which was a genuinely new idea, was another avenue by which John Paul II tried to give the Spirit some breathing room.

Anyone with even a passing awareness of the Catholic Church?s historic anti-Semitism could not fail to be moved, nor to see the long-term significance, of John Paul?s 1986 visit to the Roman synagogue. The fact that the first Pope to visit that synagogue was a son of Poland, whose birthplace was a short drive from Auschwitz, made the visit even more poignant. Addressing the assembled Jewish community as ?our elder brothers? was extraordinary. Later, he would insist, against great internal opposition, that the Vatican recognize the State of Israel and establish diplomatic relations. In 2000, he went to Jerusalem and the image of him placing his bit of paper with a prayer written on it into a cranny in the Western Wall gave symbolic expression to the changed relationship between the Church and Israel that he had achieved. Even his fiercest critics must acknowledge that John Paul II?s steps to rid the Church of anti-Semitism were important and admirable.

Pope Leo XIII was the first Pope to issue encyclicals with abandon. Subsequent Popes came to understand their role as principal teacher of the faith for the universal Church and, likewise, issued many such documents. None issued more encyclicals ? and other treatises - than Pope John Paul II. Some of John Paul?s theological contributions were strange, for example, his ?theology of the body,? but it is clear that Rome has been trying to bury that entire corpus of talks since the moment he uttered them. Pope Benedict XVI has certainly not once invoked it.

Other of John Paul?s writings constitute a significant contribution to Catholic theology. Ex Corde Ecclesiae stipulated, properly, that theology is too important to be left to academics. Laborem Exercens, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, and Centesimus Annus, carried forward the social teachings of the Church and, John Paul?s decision to compile a compendium of that teaching has helped to make it more accessible to the entire Church. Veritatis Splendor reminded the modern world that democratic regimes are built on the principle of self-governance, but that if individuals are incapable of governing themselves morally, a democratic society is threatened at its core. That encyclical also presented a less reified understanding of natural law than some of John Paul?s adulators would admit.

Indeed, Pope John Paul II is almost uniquely ill-served by his most vocal champions. Some, like George Weigel, turn him into the kind of superman who is precisely the opposite of the accessible Pope who won the world?s affection. More importantly, Weigel and his fellow neo-cons never understood John Paul II?s commitment to what we might call the Communio project or, they understood it, did not like it, and so tried to ignore it. That project, tied in with Pope John Paul II?s call for a New Evangelization, aimed to get past the reduction of religion to morality that so satisfied Weigel and his friends: They believe that the purpose of the Catholic faith is to serve as a prop for Americanism. John Paul II?s project found it clearest expression in the 22nd Chapter of Gaudium et Spes: ?The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.? John Paul II quoted this conciliar text more than any other in his many writings and sermons. Its radical Christo-centrism goes far beyond the limited theological vocabulary of the Catholic neo-cons. It is the difference between evangelization and catechesis, between the preaching the Gospel and preaching conformity to a kind of 1950s moral vision coupled with nostalgia for the pre-conciliar Church.

Indeed, while John Paul?s interpretation of Vatican II may have differed greatly from the hopes of others, he

was in every sense of the word a post-Vatican II Pope. It is not simply the fact that in his person he reflected the internationalization of the Church, its de-Italianization as it were. It is that he was thoroughly modern in both his methods of communication and in the content he chose to communicate. This is a man who wrestled with modernity in a way pre-conciliar popes did not. They ignored or condemned modernity. John Paul lived out the conciliar mandate to engage the world.

The biggest cloud that hangs over John Paul?s pontificate in terms of its historical significance is, of course, his lack of a response to the sex abuse crisis. At first, Pope John Paul II evidently dismissed the reports of such abuse, citing his experience in Poland with Communist agents who attempted to discredit clergy by throwing such accusations at them. But, over time, the evidence there was a problem, a big problem, was undeniable. He continued to champion disreputable men like Father Maciel. Then, by 2002, when the crisis exploded in ways it could no longer be denied, still, Pope John Paul II declined to take action against Maciel, he declined meetings with the victims of clergy sex abuse, and he generally failed to provide leadership. By 2002, his faculties were failing, to be sure. Just as importantly, by 2002, he was completely surrounded by men like Cardinal Sodano and his secretary, then-Archbishop, now Cardinal, Dziwicz. It has become clear to anyone who is not in denial that they were unscrupulous at best, and thoroughly corrupt at worst, in their guidance of the Church in John Paul?s later years.

Human lives are always a mix of good and bad. John Paul?s almost mystical prayer life did not, alas, keep him from making some large mistakes. His intense loyalty to his friends blinded him to their faults or, perhaps, his saintly inability to suspect the worst about people led him to make great errors in judgment, the kind of errors that a person in leadership should not, indeed must not, make. A person in authority must be able to take the measure of his collaborators, and cannot let personal loyalty cloud his judgment. He must assess their performance dispassionately. Alas, as a Pope, John Paul II failed this test of leadership.

John Paul II became the prisoner of his aides because he became a prisoner of his illness. For me, watching him at his last Angelus appearance, trying so hard to speak but unable to do so, that was his most powerful witness. In those same early years of the past decade, my mother was also suffering from Parkinson?s disease. A woman of grace, beauty and intelligence, as her faculties failed, so did her desire to go out in public. At first. But, I think as she watched the Holy Father continue to present himself, his hands shaking, his voice sometimes a whisper, eventually his whole torso moving forward, then backward, involuntarily, she drew courage from his example and she began to reclaim her life from her disease. One week before the auto accident that eventually claimed her life, we sat at a bustling restaurant in Perkins Cove, Maine and she enjoyed the attentions of the staff and the chef. I wondered at the time if she would have been so brave has it not been for Pope John Paul II?s willingness to present his failing body to the world as he did. In my book, that inspiration he gave my mother warrants his being declared ?blessed.? But, I shall wait a good fifty years to see what Clio is saying about his successes and failures as a pope. Let him now be known as Blessed; but let the ?John Paul the Great? mantra wait until Clio has had time to assess his career.

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