

# Reflections on Pope John Paul II

By Fr. Dave Heney

Cardinals from around the world flew to Rome in April of 2005 to elect a successor to Pope John Paul II. As they arrived, his body was lying in state inside St. Peter's. All the major American networks carried 24 hour live coverage of the events for several days. But what happened in Rome shocked everyone.

*Over five million people lined up to view his body!* The line stretched for many blocks around the Vatican. If you just arrived at the back of the line you knew it was a *25 hour wait* to get inside. Yet these millions of *mostly young people* stood and patiently waited just for that brief moment to simply walk by his body and pay their respects. They stood in line for hours in silent witness to the majesty of this man and his impact on their lives and the world. No one expected this, nor had anyone ever seen anything like this before. 25 hours is a long time to stand in line! In a beautiful spirit of solidarity and ministry, local Roman parishes organized food, water, sanitation facilities, and even confessions and spiritual counseling for the mourners in line.

What kind of person could inspire 5 million young people to walk, drive, or fly from around the world to stand in this very long line? How did this all happen? Let's look back and see again just who this man was.

He was a powerful presence in the Church and the world for over 27 years. Few persons in all of history have had such impact.

Pope John Paul II was a man completely without fear. He courageously spoke for pro-life issues and ending abortion, for the role of women in the church and celibacy for clergy, how the economy can help the poor, how politicians can pursue peace, and most of all, that Communism must end. His compassion made him profoundly courageous in facing every challenge well.

He settled on this path of courageous compassion at a rather young age, and it would sharply focus his entire life on affirming the freedom and dignity of the *whole human person*.

He knew from personal experience what happens when freedom is denied and dignity is crushed. He witnessed more than 120 million people die in the twentieth century from atheist Nazi, Fascist, and Communist regimes. *That is more than all the wars of history combined.* He saw his own country of Poland and his beloved Catholic Church crushed under horrible dictators. He personally saw the tragic disaster that people suffer when they are enslaved to selfishness, greed, and loss of faith. Yet his faith strengthened.

He knew that the hearts of Christians must become bold and strong, and that the Church must act in a way that changes the hearts of the world to Christ. If the world was to have a better future, the Church had to propose (...and never impose) a real and practical answer to the problem of suffering and a reliable way to find happiness. He also knew from where the answer must come, and that we would need deep faith, clear intelligence, and profound courage to help the world meet the *authentic person of Christ*.

Fortunately, John Paul had very powerful gifts for this mission. He spoke over eleven languages and had a working knowledge of several more! He earned two doctorates, one in Scholasticism, the ancient philosophy of the Middle Ages, and the other in Existentialism, the modern philosophy of the 20th Century. He knew how to draw from both the past and the present to respond to the needs of Church and to make the encounter with Christ effective in the world today.

Most important, he had this profound personal courage. He began his papacy with two ideas: First, “**Be not afraid!**” He lived that courage fully, as a man completely without fear, whether facing Soviet dictators or an assassin’s bullet. Second: “**Totus Tuus**” which means “*all is yours.*” He made himself free to offer every moment in the service of God.

## What was his message?

John Paul had powerful answers to the problems of our world today; which actually haven’t changed much since the fall of Adam and Eve. They were made in the image of a loving God, but chose pride and selfishness instead. John Paul’s dedicated his life to restoring our true God-given humanity that is rational & personal, based on freedom & dignity, and is for love & responsibility. That was his enduring hope for the world. These virtues are not just nice things for people to have but the very essence of what it means to be a human being, no matter in what century, culture, or country. Let’s take a brief look at each one.

**Rational & Personal:** John Paul believed that honest and rational people can approach the truth of God by reason. He appealed to our intelligence and good will with penetrating letters such as “The Splendor of Truth,” and “Faith and Reason.” Reason is important because, as he wrote “...blind obedience gives no glory to God.” Our faith *encourages* reasoned analysis. He also affirmed the power of each person to make a positive, personal, and practical difference. He dramatically did this himself by personally speaking to people in over 100 countries around the world. It was actually common for *more than a million people* to attend his masses; *over 3 million attended each of his Masses in Korea and the Philippines.* (More people saw him in person than any other person in all of human history) He believed so much in the goodness of each person precisely because each person is made in the image of God.

**Freedom & Dignity:** Our freedom to make choices affirms our deepest human dignity that no one can ever take away. Each of us must freely choose our path in life. Without freedom, there is no love ...and love for God, other people, and our self is the fullest expression of our human dignity. He knew that Communism destroyed freedom and dignity, but he also saw that unchecked Capitalism could as well, where people might only have value only if “useful” in some marketable way. That is why he spoke so often about protecting the freedom and dignity of human life from the moment of conception to natural death. He promoted a culture of life against what he saw in too many places, including our own country at times, a culture of death.

**Love & Responsibility:** This was actually the title of his very first book which affirmed we are responsible to seek and know the truth of things, and then respond in love. He believed that a very meaningful moment in our life happens when we must make a major decision about something important. There we must freely commit ourselves to a course of action that is faithful to the truth as God reveals and then accept the consequences of our decision. His

Catholicism was not for spectators but only for those who boldly live the faith they profess! He also called the Church to responsibly recognize its historical mistakes, especially toward Jews, when Christians at times failed to live up to the call of Jesus to love and respect all people.

While he delivered his message of freedom, dignity and responsibility to the world in sermons, letters, and encyclicals, he also elevated to sainthood those persons who *were actual living examples of the very message he preached*. By reasoned discourse and the example of heroic persons he delivered a message of the power of the human person who is free, responsible, compassionate, courageous, and like himself, a person completely without fear.

Finally, John Paul is recognized everywhere for his role in the final collapse of Communism in 1989. He knew that from the time Communism began in October of 1917, that it had brought so much suffering to our world, and especially the Church. After its final collapse, a reporter asked him when he first thought that this terrible regime would eventually fall. He simply replied, “...in October of 1917.” He knew that since Communism was fatally flawed from the very start it could not last. I am grateful that after a long personal struggle with this evil regime he lived to see it end!

Now we know why five million young people from around the world chose at great sacrifice to stand in line to walk by this amazing person for the last time.

I was privileged to meet him several times and will never forget those moments. He began his ministry a few months after I was ordained in 1978 and I still consider Pope John Paul II as a personal mentor and powerful witness of what it means for anyone of us to be a real human being ...made in the image of God.

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