

Pope John Paul II's legacy of paradox

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Pope John Paul II, who has died at the age of 84, will be remembered above all else for his efforts to reinvigorate the Catholic Church and for his role in the fall of the Soviet empire - an achievement that ushered in a new era of religious and political freedom. Yet the exceptionally long pontificate of this, the first Polish pope, will also go down in history as a period of paradox.

It began with the Vatican's contribution to the demise of the totalitarian regimes of Communist Europe but it ended with division in the Church as a revered but authoritarian pope refused to tackle what critics saw as crucial issues of reform. The deep conservatism of the man who had fought so hard for glasnost - openness - in the Soviet Union meant he was having none of it in his own Church.

Perhaps his triumphs and failings showed different aspects of one of John Paul's strongest characteristics: his courage. It was this physical and moral courage, which was never in doubt, that gave him such stature on the international stage.

It was in evidence when he backed the Solidarity movement against the ruling pro-Soviet Communists in his native Poland. It showed in the way he spoke out against what he saw as the pernicious, materialistic aspects of modern capitalism and globalisation. Latterly it shone through when, in spite of old age and growing infirmity, he undertook gruelling pastoral journeys all over the world.

Such was his humanity and charisma that wherever he went crowds flocked to him, often in their millions. He was the first media pope. He had a talent for showmanship, in the best sense, and a willingness to embrace modern methods of communication that lent force and verve to his leadership even when his physical health was failing.

Yet his conservatism, his unyielding views on sexual morality - views ignored by many of his flock, particularly in Europe and the US - plus his refusal to tolerate dissent of any kind meant that, for many, his reign did not wholly fulfil its earlier promise.

His 26-year pontificate made him the third longest serving pope in 2,000 years of Christianity. It allowed him to replace almost all the cardinals who will pick his successor, thereby virtually guaranteeing no relaxation of conservative Vatican doctrines in the next papacy.

His last years were clouded by doubts about the Vatican's handling of child-abuse outrages, notably its reluctance to force the resignation of senior prelates caught up in the cover-up of paedophile offences by fellow churchmen.

Whatever the perceived failings of his later years, it was the Church's approach to the Soviet monolith that defined much of John Paul's reign. There can be no doubt about his contribution to changing the face of Europe after almost 50 years of cold war division.

From the outset, he was convinced of the providential nature of his pontificate. "Is it not Christ's will that this pope should manifest at this precise moment the spiritual unity of Europe?" he said rhetorically on his first papal visit to Poland in 1979, eight months after being elected.

Whether providence or coincidence, it was extraordinarily fortuitous that John Paul II, the first non-Italian pope since the 16th century, should be elected at a time when the Communist regimes of eastern Europe were losing their momentum.

His obstinate courage, vigorous advocacy of the spiritual unity of Europe and personal experience of Communism undoubtedly spurred the collapse of the Communist system. His influence was most direct in

Poland. He gave unwavering support to Solidarity, the opposition workers' movement headed by Lech Walesa, the devoutly Catholic shipyard electrician.

Like the administration of Ronald Reagan in the US, John Paul was widely thought to have helped channel funds to Solidarity. He provided protection for opposition activists after martial law was imposed by General Wojciech Jaruzelski's military regime in 1981. By 1989, the Solidarity-Church alliance and the easing of east-west tensions ensured Poland became the first post-Communist country in eastern Europe.

Arguably the highlight of the pope's diplomacy came when he received Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, at the Holy See in December 1989. On this historic occasion, ties between the Vatican and the Soviet Union, suspended since the Bolshevik revolution, were restored, and the Soviet leader conceded the principle of religious freedom: "Respect for the people's national, state, spiritual and cultural identity is an indispensable condition for a stable international environment which Europe and the world now need."

John Paul's experience was crucial in encouraging him to drop the Church's traditional reserve in dealing with eastern Europe. He worked as a priest, bishop and cardinal in Poland, an experience that gave him unique insights into the Communist system as well as the appalling human suffering in Europe's postwar division.

Karol Wojtyla was born on May 18 1920 in Wadowice, only 18 months after Poland had emerged newly independent from the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian, tsarist and German empires. His father was a retired army quartermaster and his mother a schoolteacher of Lithuanian origin.

His mother died when he was six years old and, according to at least one biographer, the effect of this loss influenced his strong devotion to the Virgin Mary. The future pope lost all his immediate family through natural death by the time he was 20. He was educated at the Marcin Wadowita primary and high schools in Wadowice, and the second world war found him in Kraków, unable to begin higher education. To avoid deportation by the Germans, he became a labourer in a limestone quarry and later a stoker in a water purification plant. The experience of hard labour marked him deeply and forged his subsequent rapport with Solidarity.

His 1989 encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, written with the Berlin Wall falling, gave an insight into his views on labour exploitation and legitimate profit. The core of his economic philosophy was a rather ill-defined need to uphold the dignity of man.

It was not just his experience as a labourer that set Karol Wojtyla apart from other recent popes. He was a keen sportsman and excellent skier. Intellectually, he proved an accomplished poet and playwright and a talented actor. He knew all about artistic censorship, having been forced to take his small theatre group underground during the Nazi occupation.

Reports of youthful love affairs abounded, most notably a formative relationship with the actress daughter of his grammar-school headmaster. Whatever the truth of such liaisons, Karol Wojtyla was certainly a well-rounded man with an unusually rich experience of the world when he finally decided to go into a seminary and then be ordained in 1946. When he became pope, he retained an intensely human side with a rich sense of humour.

His first experience of Rome came in 1946, when he was sent there to study for a doctorate for two years. He gained top marks with a thesis on the Spanish mystic, St John of the Cross.

Thereafter, where possible, he sought to combine pastoral work as a priest with academic specialisation in ethics and philosophy. In 1958, when appointed auxiliary bishop of Kraków, he insisted on combining this job with a chair of ethics at Lublin University, 220km away. Having been appointed Poland's youngest bishop aged only 38, he was set on an ambitious career path. By 1964 he was archbishop of Krakow; in 1967 he was made a cardinal.

On becoming pope in October 1978 - he celebrated his silver jubilee in 2003 - he chose to be called John Paul II. That was partly in deference to his predecessor, John Paul I, who had died after only 33 days in office. It was also a tribute to John XXIII (1958-63), the first of the contemporary popes to understand the need to modernise the Church, laying down a more liberal role in the historic Vatican Council II.

However, those who hoped that John Paul II would continue the liberal tradition of the Vatican Council II were disappointed. Paradoxically for someone so internationally adventurous and innovative, his spiritual and pastoral legacy was that of a conservative.

While still a cardinal, he defined the task of a theologian within narrow confines: namely, to "guard, defend, and teach the sacred body of revelation in strict subordination to the Pope and his bishops". This intolerance of dissent remained throughout his reign and led him into conflict with Hans Kung, the German theologian, over papal infallibility.

He refused to endorse the message of liberation theology coming from Latin America, where radical priests, influenced by Marxist ideology, sought to combat social injustice by establishing a "church of the poor". Priests who joined the Sandinista government in Nicaragua were excommunicated.

The conservative in John Paul led him to give less weight to the traditionally influential counsels of the Jesuits. Instead he turned to the Opus Dei movement, making it one of the most powerful forces in the politics of contemporary Catholicism. He beatified in an almost unseemly hurry Monsignor Josemaria Escrivá de Balaguer, Opus Dei's Spanish founder.

On ethical matters he was uncompromising - especially where they concerned the family and birth control. With age, he became more dogmatic, and his 10th encyclical, *Veritas Splendor*, published in 1993, sealed his unwavering opposition to non-natural methods of birth control.

As a result, John Paul alienated many Catholics in the US and northern Europe, who felt that he was out of touch with modern mores. Despite the potential of condoms to prevent the spread of Aids, he remained impervious to pleas for a more rational view and went so far as to list contraception with genocide as an "intrinsically evil" act that would condemn sinners to eternal hellfire.

As Charles R. Morris noted in his history of American Catholicism, this meant that "the vast majority of Catholic married couples . . . stand on the wrong side of the abyss, with Hitler and Pol Pot".

Tensions over sexual morality were made worse in 2002, when more than 60 Catholic priests in the US became the subject of child sex abuse investigations. The US Church paid millions of dollars in damages to victims, and Cardinal Bernard Law, the archbishop of Boston, resigned in disgrace over the subsequent handling of the scandal - though he was later appointed to head a basilica in Rome.

John Paul II condemned the molesting of children as an "appalling sin in the eyes of God". He stated that there was no place in the Church for those who would harm children. Yet there were many who felt his words needed to be backed by tougher action.

Some of John Paul's supporters are convinced that he waged a valuable rearguard action that prevented the Catholic Church from being seduced by the values of a morally bankrupt consumer society. Others fear that rigid adherence to conservative doctrines will lead to an ever greater exodus of Catholics - and their cash - from the Church, notably in rich, sophisticated countries such as the US.

John Paul II must take credit for giving the papacy a far higher international profile, both pastorally and diplomatically. He set a precedent that his successors cannot easily ignore, continuing to travel even when age and infirmity inflicted great pain.

His early love of the theatre contributed to his remarkable ability to communicate with crowds and to exploit the enormous media interest that his activities aroused. He carried his pastoral role to the farthest corners of the globe, visiting virtually every country with a Catholic presence.

He laid particular emphasis on the developing countries, which he identified as the most promising area of evangelisation.

Nearly always these papal visits included a local beatification - testimony to John Paul's belief that the evangelisation process required a continuous flow of new role-models, especially in those countries previously without saints. The pope simplified the complex beatification procedures and created more than 480 saints, more than all previous pontiffs combined. Many were evidently chosen for their adherence to John Paul's own anti-Communist and conservative social views.

The Vatican offended non-Christians in September 2000 with *Dominus Iesus*, a document that denied the ability of other world religions to offer salvation independent of Christianity. Yet the Pope strove to improve his Church's relations with Islam, authorised the construction of a mosque in Rome and expressed vehement opposition to the US-sponsored wars against Iraq in 2003 and in 1991 - conflicts that were declared "unjust".

The pope constantly spoke out in favour of the Palestinians, complicating and delaying the establishment of formal relations with the state of Israel. The Vatican's awkward relationship with Israel under John Paul contrasted with the reconciliation he fostered with world Jewry.

In 1986 he visited a Rome synagogue and attended the first Jewish service by a pope. On this occasion he sought to atone for the Vatican's lukewarm defence of Jews during the Nazi Holocaust and referred to the Jews as "our respected elder brothers".

The response was entirely in keeping with a man who had seen the effect of the Holocaust on his home town of Wadowice: 2,000 of its 9,000 pre-war inhabitants were Jews.

Nevertheless he pushed forward the candidature for sainthood of Pius XII, the wartime Pope criticised by Jews and other non-Catholics for his public silence during the Holocaust.

John Paul's attempts to heal old wounds and bring great faiths closer together had only limited success. Relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, which had worked with the Kremlin during the Soviet era, remained frosty. Some thought that the Soviets had posed a real threat to John Paul II during the early years of his papacy.

Although not proven, it was more than plausible that the attempt on his life in St Peter's Square in May 1981 was inspired directly or indirectly by the KGB. Ali Agca, the Turkish assassin who fired three shots at the Pope, was an unlikely lone killer. The Italian courts ruled that Ali Agca had been hired by the Turkish Mafia on the instructions of the Bulgarian security services. They, the courts thought, had in turn been working for the Soviets.

The pope attributed his survival to the intervention of his patron and protectress, the Virgin at Fatima, Portugal. It was perhaps a measure of the man that John Paul not only forgave Ali Agca but visited him in prison.

Even in his last days, when racked with Parkinson's disease and arthritis and, towards the end, a respiratory infection, his purpose never faltered. Such was the mettle of the man that no adversity could detract from the nobleness of his spirit.