

“Here, from this place, I say to all the fathers and mothers of my homeland and of the whole world, to all men and women without exception: Every child conceived in the womb of its mother has the right to life.”

Pope John Paul II

Speaking on abortion, during his 13-day pilgrimage to sum up his 20-year papacy as the new millennium approached on June 15, 1999.

“The Cold War is over now. But when I was growing up, I thought my chances of dying in a nuclear blast were more likely than dying in a traffic accident — and he helped to change that. He was the right man at the right time to play a role that would change the world.”

Thomas Reese
Catholic scholar

How much innocent blood has been shed in the 20th century, in Europe and throughout the world, because certain political and social systems forsook the principles of Christ that guarantee a just peace. The tragic events in Kosovo have shown and are showing this in a painful way.”

Pope John Paul II

Speaking on the conflict in Kosovo.

“The pope was just a priest back then. He was a very popular teacher because he listened. And he would always find half a day to take one or two of us out of the city and rest in the mountains. But it wasn't rest. We worked to the core of things, to the bone.”

Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek
Cleric who served the pope in Poland and Vatican City.

“In some ways, I think he really suffered being elected pope. It took him away from the Polish land he loves so much. I remember what he said once: ‘Christ is writing his sentences on the heart of a living man, and sometimes they are painful sentences.’”

Dr. Krzysztof Rybicki
Krakow, Poland, physicist and longtime friend.



Pope John Paul II waves to the crowd that assembled Aug. 14, 1993, at the McNichols Arena in Denver. The pope was known for making a connection.

CHARISMA WON OVER WORLD

Critics feared his persuasive abilities

By DAVID CRUMM
AND PATRICIA MONTEMURRI
Knight Ridder

For more than a quarter century, Karol Wojtyla was the world's spiritual superpower.

As Pope John Paul II, his decisions shaped the lives of more than 1 billion Catholics around the world — by far the largest organized religious group on Earth.

He used his charisma in a tireless campaign for a Catholic vision of human rights that helped to topple communism, defend the poor and build bridges to other faiths, especially Judaism.

His followers didn't always agree with him, but their affection and respect were obvious in more than 100 tours, when vast crowds around the world were drawn to his outdoor Masses. He was the first pope to travel so broadly, and his talent for languages allowed him to address each national constituency in its native language.

Catholics around the world loved him for this. Some of his critics in places such as Cuba, Greece and Eastern Europe feared him for it.

In more than 25 years of travels and Vatican public events, John Paul spoke in person to more people than any other human in history.

“This is the greatest Christian witness of our time,” said papal biographer George Weigel.

Historians rank John Paul, who became pope in 1978 at the relatively young age of 58, as either the third or fourth longest-serving pope, depending on how many years they credit to St. Peter 2,000 years ago. His impact on the church will be felt for many years after his death.

He appointed nearly all of the church's top leaders, modernized and clarified the entire code of church laws, and supervised a complete revision of the catechism, the official summary of Catholic doctrine.

Though raised in an era of horse-drawn carts, he ended his life recording messages on CD-ROM; hosting a vast Web site, www.vatican.va; and joining passionately in scientific debates on genetic engineering and cloning.

The first non-Italian pontiff since 1523, he seemed unstoppable. In his youth, he survived the Nazi invasion of his native Poland and, as a young priest

and bishop, survived the communist oppression that settled over his homeland.

When Mehmet Ali Agca shot him in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981, he survived and then turned the near-fatal incident into a moral lesson by visiting his attacker in prison and forgiving him.

As he aged, he was admired for his iron-willed stamina. He kept traveling and celebrating Masses despite an abdominal tumor, removed by surgeons in 1992, followed by falls that dislocated an arm and broke a leg. Even when Parkinson's disease made speaking difficult and walking nearly impossible, he persevered.

Over the decades, John Paul devoted much of his energy to challenging the world's political power brokers with his vision of morality and social justice. Presidents and premiers often tried to ignore or take advantage of him, but he was resolutely clear about his vision of human rights even when that vision collided with secular regimes.

In the spring of 2003 in the United States, the combined influence of 36 Protestant and Orthodox denominations at the National Council of Churches couldn't get access to President George W. Bush to deliver an anti-war warning. But when the pope wanted to weigh in, Bush welcomed Cardinal Pio Laghi at the White House, though Bush knew he was providing a stage for the Vatican's message.

“The president could not turn away the pope's emissary,” said Robert Edgar, head of the council in New York. “The pope understood that in this day and age, war is obsolete, and he took a leadership role in speaking out.”

The pope couldn't prevent a war in Iraq, but he's widely credited with playing a catalytic role in toppling communist regimes in Eastern Europe.

John Paul argued that the communist system collapsed on its own flaws. But former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev acknowledged the crucial influence of John Paul's public support for the Solidarity labor movement in Poland — and his behind-the-scenes negotiations with communist bosses.

For many Americans who vividly remembered the tensions of the Cold War, his triumphant political activism in Eastern Eu-



Frank Rocha, left, of the Cathedral of St. Lawrence in Amarillo, Texas, sobs as he is blessed by Pope John Paul II at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Denver in 1993.

rope made him a hero.

“Historians may one day see him as the most important world leader in the second half of the 20th century because of his role in helping to bring about communism's fall,” said Thomas Reese, the editor of *America Magazine* and an expert on the papacy.

“The Cold War is over now. But when I was growing up, I thought my chances of dying in a nuclear blast were more likely than dying in a traffic accident — and he helped to change that,” Reese said. “He was the right man at the right time to play a role that would change the world.”

John Paul's spiritual legacy stretches far beyond the Catholic Church, said Rabbi James Rudin, coordinator of inter-religious affairs for the American Jewish Committee in New York. He was a pioneer in improving Catholic relationships with other faiths.

In 1986, he became the first pope to visit a synagogue. He embraced Jews as “our elder brothers” and bluntly condemned all forms of anti-Semitism.

Then, in 2001 in Damascus, Syria, he made the first pontifical visit to a mosque and tried to improve relations with Islam, the world's third major monotheistic faith that stems from the ancient patriarch Abraham.

A passionate concern for the protection of human life led John Paul, during virtually every one

of his world tours, to speak out against policies that he believed were threats to life.

Through the years, he opposed abortion, capital punishment, nuclear weapons, assisted suicide and the oppression of workers by communism and uncontrolled capitalism.

Sometimes his audiences listened; sometimes they didn't. Despite his staunch opposition to artificial birth control, for example, many polls of American Catholics have shown that couples almost unanimously ignored his teaching on that issue.

And though he forbade any discussion of the ordination of women priests, a majority of American Catholics tells pollsters that they think it's not a bad idea.

During John Paul's more than two decades as pontiff, most of his American followers learned to live with the paradox of loving their pope while disagreeing with some of his more traditional views.

A good example of that was embodied in the immense crowd the pontiff drew at a World Youth Day rally in the midst of a sweltering heat wave in Denver in 1993, said Martin Marty, the nation's leading historian of religion.

“There were 400,000 teenagers who came to see him, even though there was 90-degree weather in Denver,” Marty said. “Probably 90 percent of them disagreed with him on birth control,

but they also saw him as their spiritual leader and wanted to be around him.”

Richard McBrien, professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame, said, “Catholics have learned to make up their own minds and consciences. They know that some of the pope's teaching has been too narrowly crafted. They know that some of his pronouncements are an Old World vision that goes back to his history in Poland.” Wojtyla was born May 18, 1920, in Wadowice, Poland, a village 20 miles south of Krakow, and was given his father's first name, Karol. A month later, he was baptized in the 600-year-old, onion-domed St. Mary's Church, across the street from the family's small apartment.

Many theologians credit John Paul's influence with the consistency of his appeal to human dignity as the core of his belief. In a rapidly changing world, consistency is an appealing value, said Marty, the historian.

“People pay attention to him because of his personal charisma and his long record of consistently upholding the dignity of every human being,” Marty said. “People aren't moved by moralism anymore, they're moved by stories. And John Paul is a dramatic story: the story of a young actor who lived through World War II, of a priest and bishop under communism, of the first Polish pope, of a man who almost was assassinated.”