

Pope's dying hours generated wave of good will for the church

By RICHARD N. OSTLING
Associated Press

The courage Pope John Paul II showed in his final days sparked a sustained outpouring of reverence both for him and the Roman Catholic Church at a time when the faith's image has been battered by scandal, parish closings and financial troubles.

Around the clock and around the globe, tributes on television newscasts and at public services gave the church a moment of nearly unfettered good will that likely to continue at least through the funeral ceremonies of the next week.

"Obviously, you never speak ill of the dead, or the dying. But I think this moment and this pope transcend that," said David Gibson, author of "The Coming Catholic Church."

Largely forgotten, for the moment, are liberal Catholics' longstanding criticisms of the pope's strict church policies and parishioners' lingering anger at key bishops for the clerical sex abuse scandal that erupted three years ago in the United States, leading to bankruptcy in three dioceses.

Gibson thinks that the human drama of John Paul's decline — his continued efforts to lead the church right up until his last hours — "helps people move past a lot of the agony and bickering and pain and scandal

of these recent years."

He and Chester Gillis, theology chairman at Georgetown University, agree that both liberals and conservatives have, in Gillis' words, "galvanized around the person, not necessarily the teaching or the discipline of the church that he maintained."

"Even though people disagreed with him on things, he was a remarkable world leader and communicator, an unusual intellect, a polyglot," Gillis said. "The combination of skills and gifts this man possessed was rare, and people appreciate that."

The lingering papal death watch produced warm tributes from politicians — President Bush called him "a faithful servant of God and a champion of human dignity and freedom" — on down to many ordinary parishioners.

The attention has not only been a boost for the church in the United States, but also in increasingly secular Europe, where the media have given events in the Holy See intense attention — especially in countries with a Catholic tradition.

And the global importance of the pope's church has been symbolized by the ongoing television images of St. Peter's Square, providing a visible sense of strength, majesty and mystery.

Women's role strengthened, but ordination rejected

By KAY RAFTERY
Knight Ridder

PHILADELPHIA — Pope John Paul II was a mixed blessing to Catholic feminists. He held an open hand to women on many fronts, such as career equality, human rights and lay leadership — but he showed the back of his hand on the charged issue of priestly ordination.

Under his guidance, the Code of Canon Law was revised in 1983, and he encouraged women to take a stronger position, especially at the diocesan level.

Women no longer had to be content with taking care of the flowers on the altar or caring for the linens and vestments. Today, women are eucharistic ministers. They are missionaries and minister to the sick. They serve on parish committees and are altar girls.

What they are not, and never would be while John Paul reigned as pope, are priests.

Many Catholic women rankle at that, though they give him good marks for his other stands.

Regina Bannan of Philadelphia, national past president and now local president of the Women's Ordination Confer-



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Michelle Watson, 13, holds the cross high during benediction at St. Rita's catholic Church in fort Worth, Texas. The Vatican began to allow girls to be altar servers in April 1994.

ence, which advocates women in the priesthood, said John Paul, more than his predecessors, was almost "preoccupied" with the issue of the ordination of women.

The pope officially slammed the church door on the ordination activists with an apostolic letter, issued in 1994, "On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone." In it, he wrote:

"I declare that the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women, and that this judgment is to be definitively held for all the church's faithful."

He never wavered from that edict.

Some women are finding ways around those edicts.

"Groups of women are gathering in their homes and celebrate the liturgy without an ordained presider," said Sheila Durkin Dierks, author of the book "WomenEucharist."

"And I don't think it's a new thing," Dierks said. "I expect it's been done for centuries."

But Sheila Garcia, assistant director of the Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, said many women did not realize how much the Pope did to improve their church status.

"He allowed women to assume new roles with real leadership and responsibility," Garcia said. "The role of chancellor of (church law) tribunals has been opened to women. Women are directors of resources. They are on pastoral planning committees. They head family-life offices and are in charge of Catholic health-care organizations."

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