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Beatification stirs ferment over John Paul's legacy

by John L. Allen Jr.



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Pilgrims hold a sign that reads, "santo subito" ("sainthood now"), during a vigil on the eve of the beatification of Pope John Paul II at the ancient Circus Maximus in Rome April 30. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

ROME -- As historical figures, saints are complex people. Their legacies, however, often can be expressed in a fairly simple idea: St. Francis of Assisi as a lover of the earth and all its creatures; Mother Teresa as the servant of the poor; St. John Vianney as the patron of priests and parish life.

Now that Pope Benedict XVI has beatified John Paul II, and canonization seems a foregone conclusion, the question becomes: What will be the simple idea, or ideas, associated with John Paul II, which define how he's recalled by future generations?

That's more than idle curiosity, since in Catholicism memory packs a punch. Nor should it be taken for granted that the dominant images of John Paul II in his own time will be what history recalls, just as perspectives on earlier popes, not to mention ecumenical councils and other milestones, have shifted over the years.

Before a vast and enthusiastic crowd in St. Peter's Square estimated at more than a million faithful, Pope Benedict XVI this morning declared John Paul "Blessed," bringing him to the brink of sainthood. In a reference to the fact that John Paul's beatification came just over six years after his death, remarkably quick by historical standards, Benedict said he had wanted the cause to proceed with "reasonable haste."

"By his witness of faith, love and apostolic courage, accompanied by great human charisma, this

exemplary son of Poland helped believers throughout the world not to be afraid to be called Christian, to belong to the Church, to speak of the Gospel," Benedict said this morning.

"He rightly reclaimed for Christianity that impulse of hope which had in some sense faltered before Marxism and the ideology of progress," Benedict said.

Part of the subtext to this week's beatification activities in Rome has been precisely the effort to shape the memory of John Paul II. A variety of formulae have been floated — not mutually exclusive, but all putting the accent in a slightly different place:

- John Paul II as the key to understanding the Second Vatican Council (1962-65)
- John Paul II as a model of Christian humanism
- John Paul as the "pope of globalization," emphasizing the dignity of peoples from the developing world
- John Paul as a relentless missionary, reviving the evangelical spirit of Catholicism
- John Paul as an apostle of transcendence in a deeply secular world
- John Paul as a model of liturgical reform, emphasizing the "full, conscious and active participation" of the people
- John Paul as an icon of forgiveness, who apologized more than 100 times for various faults of the church, and who even embraced the man who tried to kill him in 1981

For the last forty years, debates over the meaning of Vatican II have largely defined the fault lines in the church. John Paul as the key to a proper understanding of Vatican II is among the images of the new "Blessed" preferred by Benedict XVI.

This week, the Vatican re-released the transcript of an interview given by Pope Benedict to Polish television on October 16, 2005, the first anniversary of John Paul's election to the papacy after his death.

John Paul's writings, Benedict said on that occasion, "are the authentic interpretation of Vatican II."

"We know that the pope was the man of the council, who interiorly assimilated both the spirit and the letter of the council and with his writings, he allows us to understand what the council wanted, and didn't want," Benedict said.

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That notion was seconded by Andrea Riccardi, an Italian historian and founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio, who recently published a biography of John Paul II.

"To understand the council, one has to pass through Wojtyla," Riccardi said.

Cardinal José Saraiva Martins, a Portuguese prelate who served as prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints during John Paul's cause, offered a different candidate. He said the pope's legacy could be expressed in two words: the "human saint."

Both in his life and in his teaching, Saraiva said in a session with reporters, John Paul sketched "an authentic humanism." He recalled a famous phrase from John Paul's programmatic 1979 encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*: "The path of the church runs through the human person."

John Paul's aim, Saraiva said, was to show the world that Christianity "doesn't propose a new morality," but rather "underlines all that is truly human." John Paul's struggle against the great tyrannies of the 20th century, Nazism and Communism, Saraiva suggested, was built on the foundation of his humanism.

Bishop Richard Stika of Knoxville, Tennessee, agreed that John Paul would be recalled as a saint of humanism.

"He was a great example of somebody who lived his humanity to the full," Stika told NCR. "The dignity of the human person was the cornerstone of his teaching."

John Paul as the "pope of globalization" was floated by another leading figure from Sant'Egidio, Marco Impagliazzo, a historian at the University of Perugia and since 2003 the president of Sant'Egidio.

During a panel discussion at Rome's Church of St. Dorotea on Tuesday, Impagliazzo noted how John Paul's life intersected with virtually all of the defining moments of 20th, and early 21st, century history: World War II, the Shoah, Communism, 9/11, and the rise of China as a global superpower. That experience, he said, gave John Paul II a uniquely global vision.

"He travelled to places where no one else goes, and gave courage to those peoples," Impagliazzo said, citing destinations such as Bissau and East Timor.

John Paul, Impagliazzo said, was driven by a "mystical geo-politics."

Impagliazzo also pointed to John Paul's decision to host summits of religious leaders at Assisi in order to pray for peace, calling those acts "a sign of the future in a world scarred by wars of religion."

Cardinal Francis George of Chicago proposed yet another formula: John Paul as the "evangelizer of the world."

"He took it upon himself to preach the gospel of Christ to a divided world," George said, citing the late pope's 104 foreign trips and his outreach to peoples across the globe.

In doing so, George said, John Paul drew upon both the strong missionary emphasis of the Second Vatican Council, applying it to the office of the papacy, and his own personal qualities as "an intellectual, poet, philosopher, dramatist and linguist."

Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh, Ireland, likewise stressed John Paul's missionary streak.

"He realized people weren't going to go up to the fourth floor of the papal palace to find him," Brady said. "He had to go to them."

In that sense, Brady joked, one could say that John Paul was the first pope who thoroughly "escaped the Vatican."

Both George and Brady spoke in separate interviews with NCR on Saturday.

Joaquin Navarro-Valls, a Spanish layman who served as John Paul's spokesperson, put the accent in yet another place. John Paul will be remembered, Navarro said, as the pope who revived a sense of the sacred in a world which is often tone-deaf to the supernatural.

"I once asked him, what is the main point of your papacy?" Navarro-Valls said. "He told me it was to

make transcendence visible in a world that tends to forget about it.?

tNavarro-Valls spoke in an interview with CNN just a massive Saturday evening vigil service at Rome's Circus Maximus, which drew some 200,000 people.

tArchbishop John Nienstedt of St. Paul Minneapolis sketched three key images of John which he believes will last, one of which is a ?pope of forgiveness.?

tIn an NCR interview, Nienstedt cited the pope's famous December 1983 visit to Rome's Rebibbia prison to embrace Mehmet Ali A?ca, the Turkish gunman who tried to kill him in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981.

tArchbishop Piero Marini, an Italian who served as John Paul's liturgical Master of Ceremonies for 18 years and who is now the president of the Pontifical Committee for International Eucharistic Congresses, stressed John Paul as a model of ?full, conscious and active? participation in the rites of the church.

t?He wanted to celebrate the Mass of the council with the community, stressing the active participation of the faithful, as an expression of communion,? Marini said in a presentation on Tuesday.

tMarini said that practice came out of John Paul's belief in ?the universal priesthood? of the faithful alongside the ?institutional priesthood? of those called to holy orders.

t?In the concreteness of his life and the liturgy, John Paul II wanted to make both clear,? Marini said.

tAll these images probably capture something real about John Paul II, forming a kind of biographical symphony. The question now is, in the long run of history, which will form the leitmotif of that symphony and which its minor notes.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent.]

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