

## John Paul's 'miracle water'

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 26, 2006 All Things Catholic

Catholicism has always been ambivalent about "popular religion." Church leaders point with pride to Marian devotions, Corpus Christi processions, and celebrations of saints' feast days, as evidence of the faith's deep roots in popular sensibility. Yet the same leaders often look askance when popular devotion erupts (think Medjugorje, Garabandal, or Bayside), concerned about the border between charisma and chicanery.

Thus it is that church officials have watched busloads of pilgrims arrive at Wadowice, the hometown of Pope John Paul II, drawn to the pope's "miracle water," with a certain weary caution.

The phenomenon began shortly after Pope Benedict XVI's May 27 visit to Wadowice, when Benedict referred to seeing John Paul soon raised to "the glory of the altars." Shortly afterwards, reports began to circulate about water forming at the base of a statue of John Paul in Rynek Square.

At first, people thought the appearance of the water was itself a miracle, but the mayor indicated that city officials simply thought the statue would look better with water at the base and had installed a pipe. Attention then shifted to whether the water had miraculous properties, regardless of where it came from. That's what draws pilgrims today, who fill water bottles from the statue in the conviction that, like the waters of Lourdes, it can bring some blessing.

Youth who flocked to John Paul were known in the Italian press as the "papa-boys," so *Corriere della Sera* has dubbed these pilgrims "tappo-boys," *tappo* being Italian for "cork."

Whatever its supernatural merits, the water is certainly a blessing for Wadowice, positioning it to become the Polish equivalent of San Giovanni Rotondo, the massively popular shrine of Padre Pio. Recently, a Polish company launched a gold-painted train, emblazoned with the John Paul motto *Totus Tuus*, to carry pilgrims from Krakow to Wadowice. With space for 155 disabled people, the train shows videos and photographs of John Paul on television monitors.

Devotion to the late pope in Poland remains fierce. Recently a film festival was cancelled in Lublin, where Karol Wojtyla taught, because its gift shop carried a T-shirt with the words, "I never cried for the pope."

All this suggests that when crowds chanted *Santo Subito!* during John Paul's funeral, they weren't really asking for a formal declaration. They were asserting a popular conviction that, like the tides, couldn't be held back even if officialdom tried.

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