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## The Watershed Pope?

By Jeff Fountain

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We don't have to agree with all Karol Wojtyla stood for to acknowledge that he was one of history's giants. The second-longest serving pope and the most-traveled by far in history, John Paul II was the first pope to celebrate mass with an Orthodox leader, the first to apologize for treatment of dissenters like John Hus and Martin Luther, the first to visit a mosque and the first to confess the sins of the Roman Catholic Church.

He spoke out boldly against atheistic communism. He attacked the false freedoms offered by western capitalism. He issued clear teaching to his global flock in times of rapid change and moral confusion. His 14 papal encyclicals addressed the dignity and sanctity of life, global poverty and inequity, and many other matters of faith and reason.

He demonstrated his message of forgiveness by visiting his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, in prison. (Agca, still in prison in Istanbul serving multiple sentences for robbery and murder, prayed for his "brother" the pope during his last week of suffering, his lawyer told newspapers.)

Truly, the world lost its most lucid voice of conscience with the passing of Karol Wojtyla. His memory, however, is likely to exercise a powerful global influence for years to come.

## Improbable

Few remember the improbable circumstances surrounding his election. In 1978, the future was not very hopeful. I remember it well, as my wife Romkje and I had spent four months of that year in Italy as part of YWAM's effort to launch the ministry of the Anastasis, then docked in Venice. Red Brigade terrorists had spread fear in Italy with the murder of the former premier Aldo Moro. The Cold War was being presided over by Leonid Brezhnev and Jimmy Carter.

Into this uncertain state of world affairs, the new pope spoke a clear word to the world: "Be not afraid!" This was his inaugural message in St Peter's Square, and he wasted no time taking it personally to his compatriots, two million of whom gathered to hear him in Krakow in June 1979. "Be not afraid!" he repeated to the crowd, giving courage to Lech Walesa to birth Solidarity, the trade union movement which successfully challenged the grip of the communist party in Poland. Within a decade, the whole communist empire had imploded.

## Turning Point?

After the passing of John Paul II, Catholics the world over prayed for the election of the new pope, aware that the outcome could carry great consequences. Surely, in the light of John Paul II's impact on world affairs, that was a matter of prayer for all believers.

The choice of an African, Asian or Latin American pope would have sent a strong signal to the world that the center of gravity of Christianity has shifted from the west. In 1900, two out of every three Catholics lived in Europe; today only one in five does.

This trend also parallels Protestant trends. The Assemblies of God in Brazil alone has more members than all the evangelicals in Europe.

Disappointingly perhaps for many, the cardinals chose a First-Worlder, a European, a German, as John Paul's successor. Yet Johann Christoph Arnold of the Bruderhof, an Anabaptist movement persecuted in earlier days by the Catholic Church, described their choice as "brave and bold." "Clearly (Cardinal Ratzinger) is not popular in some circles: many prayed and hoped for someone more lenient....But...the answers to the challenges and crises of our present age will not be found in compromise, but in returning to the simple and age-old truths of Jesus."

Time will tell just how much Benedict XVI will return the Catholic Church to these "simple and age-old truths of Jesus." But already historians can accurately describe his predecessor as the watershed pope, who presided over one of history's greatest turning points, when the church became predominantly non-western.

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