

# A Reign Both Brief and Brilliant

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Thirty-three days. The reign of Pope John Paul was brief yet brilliant, filled with style and — remarkable, considering its brevity — with substance.

His smile, humor and simplicity captivated the world, but the pontiff used them as powerful teaching tools.

Pope John Paul showed the humanity of the papacy, and yet more.

In the Sistine Chapel, the Patriarch of Venice jokingly told his brother-cardinals that he hoped "God would forgive them" for electing him. He confessed to them, "Of the Vatican and the Curia I know very little. I ask you to help me because I'm familiar only with the *Annuario Pontificio* (the official Vatican directory)."

But his smile as he appeared on the balcony of St. Peter's just hours after the election told the thousands in the piazza and the millions watching on television that he was a man of hope and confidence, reflecting, as he had said, his faith in the powerful support of God's grace and the cooperation of his fellow bishops.

His simplicity had profound effects.

By quietly putting aside the tiara and the throne, Pope John Paul, the first pontiff in 900 years to reject a coronation ceremony, emphasized that the Church is much more a spiritual force than a political power, and that the pope is a "servant of the servants of God," rather than "the father of princes and kings," as the outmoded coronation liturgy would have put it.

His humor was never pointless.

Journalists at their special audience heard some of their pre-conclave speculation parmed as the new pope reminded them that reporters were more interested in "whether Napoleon III or the King of Prussia wore red or gray socks," than in what those rulers had to say. But the journalists could only glow as Pope John Paul also told them that if St. Paul came back, he would come as "editor-in-chief of Reuters and ask for time on RAI (the Italian TV network)."

He poked fun at himself as well as others.

He told students he would have studied harder as a youth if he had known that one day he would be pope. "But now I am old and there is no time. But you young people have time, health, memory and commitment. Try to take advantage of all these gifts."

Pope John Paul issued no encyclicals or formal papal pronouncements. What he had to say and teach was summed up in his investiture address, four general audiences, one discourse each to the College of Cardinals and the Vatican diplomatic corps and his talks to several groups of bishops.

But even in these mere handfuls of addresses he made a deep impression, giving every indication of vindicating the conclaves' desire for a man who would be both firm in doctrine and conscientious in pursuing the course set by the Second Vatican Council.

From the first moment of his pontificate, he indicated that by becoming the first pope in history to choose a double name, incorporating the names of John and Paul, the pontiffs who convened and closed the council. Like his predecessors, he told a general audience that the Church "must update her teachings; understand them better, and present them in a better form" but not change their essential meaning.

He told some 50 U.S. bishops at a special audience on Sept. 21 of the importance of defending the family. "In particular, the indissolubility of Christian marriage is important. Although it is a difficult part of our message, we must proclaim it faithfully as part of God's word, part of the mystery of faith."

While showing profound respect for the Church's tradition, Pope John Paul gave little comfort to religious extremists. At St. John Lateran Basilica, the pope said that certain abuses "of liturgical matters" had brought about "equally unsupportable reaction" — a clear referral to those celebrating free-styled radical liturgies and those offering traditionalist Masses.

Known for his pastoral concern for the poor and suffering, he emphasized to the diplomats accredited to the Vatican, that "our activity to the international community is chiefly one that more specifically could be called pastoral and which belongs properly to the Church." But he refused to equate the Church's pastoral concern with a spiritual, other-worldly realm.

He was not afraid of politics. Pope John Paul made a profound impression on Jewish people when, in addition to praying for the success of the Camp David talks, he referred to the need of "security" of the state of Israel. More significantly, in response to a letter of congratulations from Israeli President Yitzhak Navon, John Paul was the first pope to address a letter to the "President of the State of Israel, Jerusalem, Israel."

Pope John Paul's pontificate was brief but meaningful. Cardinal Terence Cooke perhaps said it best: "In our humanity, we think of what might have been."



## Visit to Venice

The then Cardinal Albino Luciani when he was the patriarch of Venice is seated in a gondola as he takes Pope Paul VI on a tour of the famed canal city. The other man in the gondola is unidentified. (RNS)

The Polly-O Family wishes to express its deepest sympathy to the Catholic Community of The Rochester Diocese on the passing of Pope John Paul I.

His warm heartedness, humility, and strength of faith in mankind during his short reign will be long remembered.

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