

## FEATURE

## A different Pope John Paul II emerges in new book

*His Holiness: John Paul II and the Hidden History of Our Time* by Carl Bernstein and Marco Politi. Doubleday (New York, 1996). 582 pp.

Reviewed by John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

*His Holiness*, the latest biography of Pope John Paul II, is an ambivalent look at a man described as "the last of the giants on the global stage."

Written by Watergate journalist Carl Bernstein and Italian Vatican correspondent Marco Politi, it depicts the pontiff as an ideological victor over communism but a bitterly disappointed loser in wider moral arenas.

The pope comes across alternately as larger than life and hopelessly out of touch with his flock. But is this portrait or caricature?

The question arises in part because of the authors' methods: ambiguously sourced material, heavy interpretation and reconstructed dialogue.

Such techniques may work fine for tattling on disgraced politicians, but it's not easy to apply them to the closed world of the Vatican and the complex personality of this pope.

Relying heavily on CIA sources, the book focuses on an alleged political agreement between the Holy See and the United States during the 1980s. This dubious thesis, when unveiled in 1992, drew a torrent of denials and even a papal disclaimer.

The idea that President Reagan and the pope hatched a plan for communism's demise during a meeting in 1982 always seemed unlikely to veteran Vatican observers, who recall that the president actually nodded off during the pope's speech that day.

Leaving aside the "holy alliance," the book presents an intriguing and very readable account of the pope's early years, his rise to the church's top spot and his real role in Poland's democratic evolution. This is Pope John Paul the hero, who knew just when to give the rotten tree of communism a good shake.

But a much different pontiff emerges from the final chapter, titled "The Angry Pope." According to this account, beneath the veneer of papal charisma and charm lie barely concealed rage, disillusionment and intolerance of those who refuse to bend to his will.



BOOK  
REVIEW

This is a pope determined from the start to "systematically crush" dissent, prone to "caustic outbursts" at his Polish compatriots for their acceptance of abortion, bluntly antagonistic toward Islam in private and reduced almost to a dysfunctional state by those who question his authority — especially women.

There's no doubt that the pope feels strongly about all these issues. But the personality described here does not fully mesh with the one the world has seen and heard over the last 18 years. To dramatize events, the authors sometimes put words into the pope's mouth, and that's risky business.

Credibility is strained to the breaking point on page 521, in a supposed 1994 conversation between the pope and Nafis Sadik, the woman who chaired the U.N. population conference that year.

After Sadik tells the pontiff that many women endure sexual violence or irresponsibility on the part of their husbands, the pope is quoted as interjecting: "Don't

you think that the irresponsible behavior of men is caused by women?"

Sadik's jaw dropped, the reader is told. Jaws also dropped at the Vatican, where the account was met with incredulity. Was this the same pope whose 1988 apostolic letter chastised men precisely for leaving women to face such pregnancies alone? Or who once said men could commit adultery in their hearts, by viewing their wives as mere objects of pleasure?

The pope is described today as a lonely man fighting a "growing tide of criticism" over his moral absolutism and traditionalist policies. At the same time, he nurses the wound of his "broken dream," that of a great spiritual renewal proceeding from the East. His Polish compatriots, it says here, were the first to let him down.

His fourth trip to his homeland in 1991 is presented here as a moment of ultimate betrayal, as a crowd listens with detachment while the pope shouts out his denunciation of abortion.

"This people worships me with its lips, but not in the depths of its heart," the pope is quoted as saying.

A poignant moment and a great quote, if it's accurate. But, as elsewhere, the book offers no specific attribution.

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