

FEATURE

Gaps weaken portrait of 'revolutionary' pope

Man of the Century: The Life and Times of Pope John Paul II, by Jonathan Kwitny. Henry Holt (New York, 1997). 754 pp., \$30.

Reviewed by John Thavis
Catholic News Service

The trend in papal biographies is toward the ponderous, and Jonathan Kwitny's *Man of the Century* weighs in at 754 pages. The focus is familiar: Pope John Paul II's political and social significance in a century of ideological upheaval.

As in other recent works about the pope, the reader gets full immersion in Polish history and a detailed account of what friends and colleagues remember of Karol Wojtyla before he was elected in 1978. Most of the stories reported here are old news.

On the plus side, however, a realistic portrait emerges. The pope comes across as a complex human being, not a monumental figure too distant — or too enigmatic — to understand.

Despite its imposing title, *Man of the Century* spends many pages debunking myths about Pope John Paul. Kwitny employs a healthy skepticism about certain chapters of the pope's life, and tries to stick to the facts.

Several previously reported episodes are nicely deflated here: the unlikely "Holy Alliance" between the Reagan administration and the Vatican to defeat communism, the Vatican bank's supposed culpability in an Italian financial scandal, the future pope's alleged dissuasion of a Catholic couple's attempt to baptize a Jewish boy, and even the theory that Karol Wojtyla had a secret girlfriend as a youth.

Kwitny is at his best when he finds cooperative interview subjects, like Antonio Marini, the Italian magistrate who prosecuted the alleged "Bulgarian connection" to the papal shooting. In an entertaining chapter set in Marini's office, the supposed Bulgarian plot dissolves as the two review the evidence point by point.

The author has his own rather hefty thesis about the pope, however. He says the pontiff's role in the global realignment of the last decade has been misunderstood: Far from being a cheerleader in a Cold War won by Washington, the pope was the main protagonist. He argues that

Karol Wojtyla, as a theologian and bishop in the 1950s, begat nothing less than a "revolution," a nonviolent mass movement similar to those of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, which eventually triumphed in his Polish homeland and the rest of Eastern Europe.

The book highlights some early actions of the pope who, as a bishop of Krakow, repeatedly protected the Catholic intellectual movement that would give birth to Solidarity years later. And it offers intriguing evidence that the Reagan administration, in fact, did nothing to support Solidarity in the 1980s.

Man of the Century makes much of the pope's cautious attitude toward capitalism and his affinity for some of Marxism's ideals. The research here helps explain how the pope, when he visited Lithuania in 1993, could say that Marxism held a "kernel of truth" — a remark that left many Westerners mystified.

More dubious is the book's claim to have uncovered a major treatise on "Catholic Social Ethics," supposedly penned by the future pope in the early 1950s and published underground. Only a few copies are said to survive. Kwitny quotes passages that make Father Wojtyla sound like a budding liberation theologian: For example, protests and strikes are described as legitimate means of "class struggle." If the work is authentic, it deserves better confirmation.

There are places in *Man of the Century* where one senses that the author has come up against the wall of silence at the Vatican, but may not realize it. For example, he is sometimes given surrogate interviews in place of key officials, like Cardinals Joseph Ratzinger or Alfonso Lopez Trujillo. At times, he candidly expresses his exasperation with pinning down simple facts at the Vatican, and one can sympathize.

In general, the book's treatment of internal church issues under Pope John Paul's leadership is not as well-researched as the political questions. The author hits the highlights of this papacy, but without weaving them into a compelling narrative. The story of Pope John Paul and the 20th century church is still waiting to be written.



Congress considers rap, rock lyrics

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The graphic imagery of some shock rock and rap lyrics came under scrutiny during a Nov. 6 Senate informational hearing to examine their social impact.

The lyrics of shock rock band Marilyn Manson was the prime target, as one of the witnesses held the lyrics accountable for the suicide of his teenage son.

Ray Kuntz of Burlington, N.D., said his son, Richard, was listening to the band's album "Antichrist Superstar" when he committed suicide.

Kuntz recalled his son showing him the Marilyn Manson CD. "I failed to recognize that my son was holding a hand grenade, and it was live, and it went off in his head," he said.

Witness Dr. Frank Palumbo of the American Academy of Pediatrics said having the music in youngsters' hands validates its content: "If I'm seeing it on TV, then it must be OK," he said.

The hearing was not designed to craft legislation, but future hearings are likely, perhaps with recording artists testifying.

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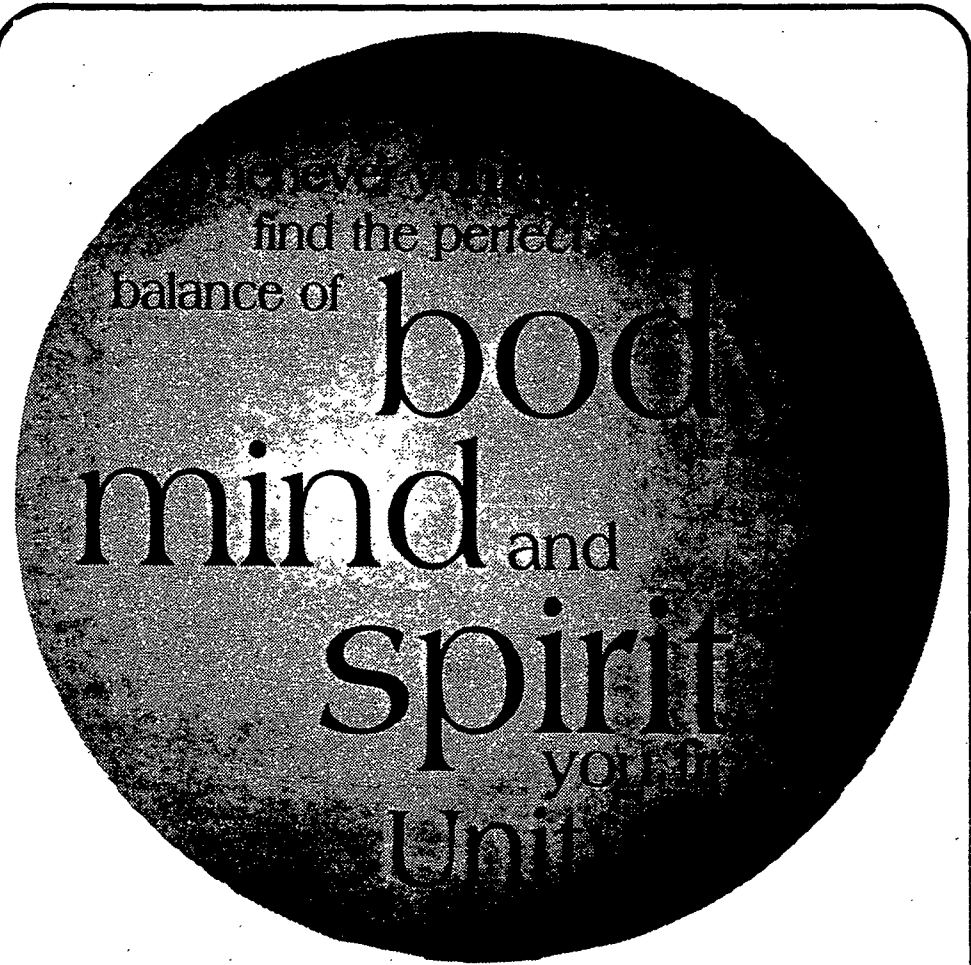
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