

# Popes

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"He began to speak: 'I come from a country far away, but now I am here near to you,'" Father Hart said.

Six days later, on Oct. 22, Pope John Paul II celebrated his first Mass as pontiff. With his election, a series of rapid-fire changes that had gripped the Catholic world finally ended — and a papacy began that has now almost extended into the next millennium.

There have been only three heads of the Roman Catholic Church in the past 35 years — yet they all held that role during a 52-day stretch of 1978. "The Year of the Three Popes" included Pope Paul VI's death on Aug. 6; Pope John Paul I's election on Aug. 26 and his death just 33 days later, Sept. 28; and Pope John Paul II's election on Oct. 16.

## Rapid changes

The historic events began when Pope Paul VI died at 80 years old, marking the end of his 15-year pontificate. Twenty days later, Cardinal Albino Luciani of Venice took the name of Pope John Paul I in honor of his two predecessors, John XXIII and Paul VI.

Father Hart said he'd had the chance to see Cardinal Luciani celebrate Mass when he was still the patriarch of Venice.

"I understood that he was a very good preacher — and he was. He connected very well with his audience," Father Hart said. "So I wasn't surprised that his audiences (while he was pope) were electrified."

The world was jolted, however, in the final days of September, when it was announced that John Paul I had been discovered dead in his bed. He was one month short of his 66th birthday.

"It hardly seemed possible then. It still hardly seems possible now," remarked Bishop Clark, who served as eucharistic minister at one of the few Masses celebrated by John Paul I during his pontificate.

Father Hart dismissed the occasional rumors that John Paul I was murdered because his policies antagonized important Vatican officials.

"I think enough evidence was gathered that he was from a small diocese with this easy bureaucracy. Now he was going to this gigantic machinery, following a workaholic pope," Father Hart said.

Father Hart added that John Paul I was on heart medication and likely suffered a heart attack because he was so preoccupied with papal matters and forgot to take his medicine.

"All those rumors (of murder) were never shown to be true. I think the whole job sort of overwhelmed him," agreed Bishop Joseph L. Hogan, who was at the time bishop of Rochester.

With John Paul I's death, cardinals from

all over the world made their second trip to Rome in less than two months, to again elect a new pontiff from among their peers. This time their man was the relatively young, 58-year-old Wojtyla. He became the first Polish native to assume the pontificate, as well as the first pope from outside of Italy in some 455 years.

"We were so excited about a non-Italian," Bishop Hogan recalled. "I called all the Polish pastors to congratulate them."

Both Father Hart and Bishop Clark recalled that the crowd in St. Peter's Square was dumfounded when the name "Wojtyla" was announced, some thinking that perhaps an African pope had been elected.

"That was stunning news," Bishop Clark said. "Everybody knew it was possible to elect someone other than an Italian, but there's a difference between speculation and reality."

Father Hart said that the gathering was generally enthusiastic when Wojtyla made his first appearance as Pope John Paul II. An exception, he noted, was a group of young Italian men who began to leave the square in disgust.

But John Paul II gave a moving speech saying he was now the bishop of Rome, "that he was their bishop," Father Hart said.

"The kids stopped and listened. From day one, he knew the right thing to say."

## Contrasting characters

Bishop Hogan said that John Paul II has continued to connect closely with his audiences over the years.

"He's a real charmer. He has the common touch," said Bishop Hogan, who keeps a 1994 photograph and letter from John Paul II — congratulating him on the 25th anniversary of his installation as bishop — on the wall of his room at the Sisters of St. Joseph Convent Infirmary in Pittsford.

Many of the same people skills were also evident in John Paul I, Bishops Hogan and Clark remarked.

"He had a tremendously warm personality that reached out to people," Bishop Hogan said.

Bishop Clark remembers John Paul I for his "very folksy, down-to-earth manner, even in the most formal of circumstances. I think the people found him very charming and warm."

Yet John Paul I's informality didn't set too well with some members of the Roman Curia, Father Hart said. Each afternoon during this period, Father Hart would stop in on the late Father Joseph Beatini, a Rochester diocesan priest who was hospitalized in Rome at the time. Father Hart's visits would come on the heels of morning visits from a Vatican official who would tell Father Beatini that the Curia preferred to see a more conventional, take-charge pope — rather than one who openly sought input from his subordinates.

"Every afternoon I got treated to how dis-

couraged the Curia were with him — the fact he was asking for help," Father Hart said.

But to the rest of the world, John Paul I's infectious smile left a profoundly uplifting impression. According to Catholic News Service, that smile was recently recalled by John Paul I's successor during a 20th-anniversary memorial Mass on Sept. 28.

"Twenty years ago today, Pope John Paul I closed his eyes in the world to open them in the light of eternity," John Paul II said. "(He) took up the smile of God in order to give it to humanity, becoming a stimulus for a commitment in the faith, labor in love and constant hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Whereas both John Pauls are noted for their outgoing natures, Bishop Hogan observed that Paul VI was quite the opposite. Paul VI, he noted, "gave the impression that he was removed and distant. He was a very sensitive person, and did not find mingling with people that enjoyable."

"He was very introspective," Bishop Clark said. "Like any sensitive person could be, he was tortured by the conflicting streams that touched his life."

Father Hart said that the fact these popes differed in character is actually something historically the cardinals in conclave have sought, regularly electing popes with differing personalities from their predecessors.

"If Pius XII (1939-58) was distant and severe, then you'd get the warm and jolly John XXIII (1958-63)," Father Hart said. "Then Paul VI was reserved — the pendulum swings again."

## Places in history

Unfortunately for John Paul I, his pontificate was too short to leave much of a mark in history beyond his personality.

"Over the years I've thought, 'What would the church have been like if he had served 20 years?'" Bishop Clark remarked.

Father Hart suggested that John Paul I's legacy would have centered around pastoral initiatives.

"That was his great love, and would have been his great contribution," he said.

Meanwhile, Paul VI, according to Bishop Clark, was "a person who had the Herculean task of leading the church through the final stages and implementation of Vatican II."

Bishop Clark noted that Paul VI was a master of compromise, seeking to bring about change while also preserving the unity of the Catholic Church.

"I've always speculated or thought he was pushed to the fullest extent of his spiritual and intellectual powers," Bishop Clark said. "I think history will remember him very kindly."

Father Hart said that John Paul II has successfully continued Vatican II implementation while his boundless energy has resulted in scores of other accomplish-

ments.

"He has always been noted as someone who could do two things at once," Father Hart remarked. For example, he said, John Paul II busied himself reading books right during the conclave discussions that led to his own election as pope.

The current Holy Father has traveled nearly 700,000 miles while visiting 119 countries, making him far and away the most-traveled pope in history.

"Because of the length of his tenure and the extraordinary shape his papacy has taken because of his travel and public appearances, it's going to take historians a long time just to go through it all," Bishop Clark said with a laugh.

Bishop Hogan added that Pope John Paul II is "probably one of the most brilliant that we've ever had — an expert in diplomacy and languages."

Bishop Clark added that John Paul II will also be remembered for "his powerful theme of the God-given dignity of every human person."

"He would take on those systems when he felt they were oppressive to that human dignity," said Bishop Clark, noting the pope's strong stances against both communism and abuses of capitalism.

Father Hart added that the current pontiff "has canonized more saints than (previous popes) in the last 300 years put together." John Paul II has canonized 280 saints and beatified 804 people.

Father Hart went on to note that John Paul II brought to completion the revised Code of Canon Law, which took effect in 1983. In addition, he oversaw the writing of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the first official summary of teaching for the universal church in more than 400 years.

The current pope has also issued 13 encyclicals. His latest one, *Fides et Ratio* ("Faith and Reason") — which raises concerns about a widening gap between modern thought and religious teachings — was released Oct. 15.

Bishop Clark pointed out that John Paul II is not done making history, despite advancing age and health difficulties. He noted that the pontiff is eagerly awaiting the new millennium, which he refers to as "the great jubilee." The celebration is being preceded by an elaborate three-year preparation period devised by the pope.

"If it's by sheer willpower to see the millennium in, he'll see it in," Bishop Clark commented. "Really, he's talked about it since his election."

Bishop Clark said that he has deep admiration for all three men who held the office of pope in 1978 — as he would for anybody else charged with being leader of the Roman Catholic Church.

Evaluating the responsibilities of a pope, Bishop Clark stated that "the word 'awesome' generally applies. It would have to be a person of enormous spirituality and depth to do it in peace and tranquility."

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