

Alliance between evangelicals, Catholics among legacies of John Paul II's papacy_40405

April 5, 2005

Posted: 4/05/05

Alliance between evangelicals, Catholics among legacies of John Paul II's papacy

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) — The dynamic bishop from Krakow who became one of the 20th century's most towering figures departed earthly life April 2, but his legacy — including the special esteem in which many American evangelical Protestants held him and many of his teachings — lives on.

Perhaps the most prominent evidence of Pope John Paul II's special place in the hearts of evangelicals came in comments by the nation's most prominent evangelical, President Bush. "The Catholic Church has lost its shepherd, the world has lost a champion of human freedom, and a good and faithful servant of God has been called home," Bush said, in a statement he issued shortly after Vatican officials announced the pontiff's death.

Pope
John Paul
II died
April 2.

See
related
story
[John Paul
II: A
Baptist
reflection
by James
Leo
Garrett
Jr.](#)

Bush later attended a special memorial Mass at Washington's St. Matthew's Cathedral, located just a few blocks from the White House.

Bush has frequently made reference to the "culture of life," a phrase coined by John Paul II in his many writings on life-ethics issues. Bush has used them mainly in the context of discussing abortion, stem-cell research and euthanasia. He cited the term repeatedly in discussing the recent dispute over the fate of Terri Schiavo.

Indeed, many prominent evangelicals cited the pope's commitment to a pro-life ethic in reflections on his legacy.

"His passion brought leadership on many cultural issues, including traditional marriage and the protection of unborn children. He also took a strong stance against embryonic stem cell research and human cloning," said Tony Perkins, president of the conservative Family Research Council, in a statement on John Paul II's death. "The pope must be recognized for

his prolific writings, his gift for language, and his outspoken affirmation of life that we enjoy from our Creator, from conception to natural death."

Such effusive praise for a pope from conservative Protestants stands in stark contrast to the views of Catholicism in general — and the papacy in particular — many evangelical leaders expressed prior to John Paul II's election in 1978. Indeed, many conservative and fundamentalist Protestants led opposition to the election of President John F. Kennedy in 1960 because of Kennedy's Catholicism.

According to an expert on Catholicism, John Paul II's views on life-ethics issues as well as his attempts to reach across religious barriers contributed to the new attitudes toward him.

"I think this pope particularly had a clear concern to join in dialogue with people of other faiths, and we see that" in his actions, such as visiting synagogues and mosques and meeting with religious leaders wherever he went, said Joe Favazza, an ex-Catholic priest and professor of religious studies at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tenn.

Favazza also cited the pontiff's legendary charisma in explaining his good relations with many evangelical leaders.

"He could look you right in the eye, and he could be very personal with you, and you had to deal with this presence. And I think that's exactly what happened with a lot of the evangelical leaders," he said. "I think he was a man of great integrity, a man who both talked the talk and walked the walk. And I think that had a great effect on a lot of people who believed the Catholic Church prior to 1978 had less faith than rituals."

But, Favazza noted, for all their embracing of John Paul II's rhetoric on life ethics regarding abortion and euthanasia, the pope had a more strenuous standard in mind when he first penned the phrase.

"I think Bush and others in some ways tried to position themselves as friends of the pope or sympathetic to the pope by pushing these buttons, but John Paul's vision of the 'culture of life' extended beyond abortion to capital punishment, and from individual morality to corporate morality," he said. He noted that John Paul II, in his most recent visit with Bush, strongly criticized the war in Iraq. Bush and others have differed with the pope's teachings on capital punishment, contraception and economic issues.

Many evangelical and other conservative commentators have also praised John Paul II for his role in helping bring an end to communist rule in Eastern Europe. In particular, they credit the pontiff for providing momentum to the "Solidarity" movement that ultimately brought an end to Soviet domination over his native Poland in the early 1980s.

"Evangelical Christians should honor the courage of this man and his historic role in bringing communist tyranny to an end — at least within the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe," wrote Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in an April 4 column published by the Southern Baptist Convention's news service.

However, as Favazza and other observers of his papacy have pointed out, John Paul II in later years also strongly criticized the excesses of unrestrained capitalism.

More moderate religious leaders have praised John Paul II for his commitment to the poor. "His words and his actions— indeed, his very life — exemplified the authority of religion to resist captivity to politics and to transcend the interests of narrow nationalism in order to build a global community in which people live with mutuality, peace and freedom from intolerance, prejudice and poverty," said Welton Gaddy, a Baptist minister who is president of the Interfaith Alliance, in a statement released April 4.

Roy Medley, general secretary of the American Baptist Churches, called

John Paul II "a leading voice for the poor and disenfranchised throughout the world, and a strong advocate for peacemaking and for understanding among cultures and religions," according to the American Baptist News Service.

One value that the pope and evangelicals shared strongly was his advocacy for religious freedom — which included personal confrontations with some of the world's most oppressive dictators.

Favazza noted that John Paul II was one of the leading advocates for the strong statement on religious liberty adopted by the Second Vatican Council in 1962-63. Then, during his papacy, he "took the next step with that and said, first of all, we're going to challenge those leaders who need to be challenged [for violations of their people's religious freedom] and also admit there are times that the Catholic Church itself has transgressed this."

For example, John Paul II famously apologized for the Crusades and issued a statement stating that the Catholic Church did not place any blame on the Jewish people for Christ's death.

"He advanced, I guess, the tradition on religious liberty that was well articulated in the Second Vatican Council," Favazza said.

Nonetheless, some conservative evangelicals did note that fundamental differences between Protestants and Catholics remain, particularly over the role of the papacy itself.

"In the end, evangelicals should be thankful for the personal virtues Pope John Paul II demonstrated, and for his advocacy on behalf of life, liberty and human dignity. Yet we cannot ignore the institution of the papacy itself, nor the complex of doctrines, truth claims and false doctrines that John Paul II taught, defended and promulgated," Mohler wrote, singling out the pope's teachings on justification by faith and his devotion to particular Catholic doctrines about Mary, the mother of Jesus, whom the pope labeled

"co-redemptrix" with Christ.

But Favazza said that in itself was significant — that John Paul II could maintain strict devotion to distinctive Catholic positions while still reaching out to many who had previously been very alienated from the papacy.

"As much as he was concerned with dialogue and relations with other denominations, he was still very clear about the boundaries of the Catholic faith," Favazza said. "So, he will be remembered for many things, but compromise will not be one of them."

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.