

LIFE AND WELLBEING RELIGION

Remembering Wojtyla, the great communicator

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The birth centenary of Karol Wojtyla risks passing unnoticed on account of the COVID-19 pandemic. Probably our thoughts are justifiably elsewhere...

Tomorrow, May 18, marks the centenary of his birth in the then nascent state of Poland, rising like a phoenix from the ashes of World War I. Wojtyla, the future Pope John Paul II, was moulded within the context of a staunch Catholic upbringing, a solid value-laden milieu, albeit marked by the early death of his mother and an elder brother and sister.

As a young Jagellonian University philology student, he was deeply attracted to drama and the recitation of poetry. These dreams were interrupted by World War II, when, during the Nazi occupation of Poland, he was forced to go underground while he actively discerned the Lord's call to become a priest. At the same time, to avoid deportation to Germany, he worked as a manual labourer in a quarry and at a chemical plant.

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Ordained a priest in 1946, his dynamism and charisma were soon noticed by his superiors. He lectured in philosophy, was active among youth, especially as a university chaplain, and also served as an assistant priest in a parish.

Named bishop at the age of 38, he later led the important archdiocese of Kraków for nearly two decades. He actively participated in the Second Vatican Council. Together with the renowned Polish Primate, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, he was the courageous face of the Catholic Church in the difficult and stressful years of communism.

Chosen Pope in 1978, he led the Church for nearly 27 years. Those were indeed eventful years marked by 104



Pope John Paul II meeting the rabbi Elio Toaff in a visit to a synagogue in Rome in 1986. The late pontiff was born a century ago, on May 18, 1920. PHOTO: LEEMAGE VIA AFP

international pastoral journeys, his setting foot on all continents (except Antarctica) and thousands of encounters with people from all walks of life and backgrounds – statesmen, church leaders, leaders of other religions, academics, scientists, workers and simple peasants. He witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent demise of the communist bloc. He ushered the Church into the new millennium. He was the first modern Pope to enter a synagogue and a mosque.

A great communicator and exuding confidence on the stage, John Paul II was a man who sought to build bridges.

Strong in his principles, he preached upon and defended human dignity on countless occasions. Undaunted when facing dictators or international fora, such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe or the World Council of Churches, he spoke fearlessly as a

modern-day prophet, and never hesitated calling a spade a spade. He defended the unborn child, oppressed peoples, displaced migrants, the victims of war... the list is endless.

Besides authoring a very long list of papal documents on a wide range of themes, he also published five books: *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (1994), *Gift and Mystery* (1996), *Roman Triptych, Meditations in Poetry* (2003), *Rise, Let Us Be on Our Way* (2004) and *Memory and Identity* (2005).

Among the unforgettable and defining moments of his papacy, one is bound to mention his first visit as Pope to Poland in 1979; his closeness to *Solidarność*, the first free trade union in a communist-governed nation; the assassination attempt on his life in May 1981; his encounter with the leader of the then Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev; his visit to Cuba, then led by Fidel Castro; his pil-

grimage to the Holy Land; his walk through the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, accompanied by Chancellor Helmut Kohl; the World Youth Days and the Great Jubilee of the year 2000.

Pope John Paul II was indeed *A Witness to Hope*, as he was described by George Weigel in a biography that bears this title. His courage and determination were a point of reference and a source of inspiration to millions, even beyond the confines of the Catholic Church or Christianity.

In the last years of his life he was struck by debilitating illnesses. Even then, while facing mobility and communication difficulties, he demonstrated how a person can suffer with dignity, without being crushed by pain.

The witness borne by John Paul II, born a century ago, remains a shining beacon to many, especially in these challenging times.